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ELLERY QUEEN'S

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MAGAZINE

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by Michael Gilbert

Jill Eikenberry and Michele Greene
(see page 105)

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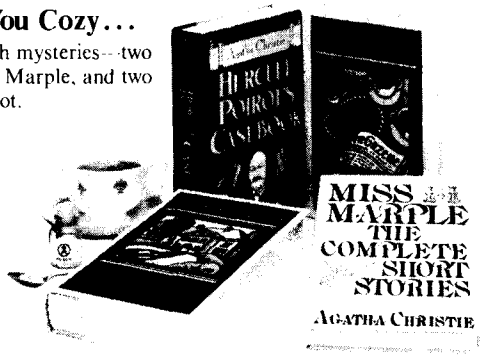

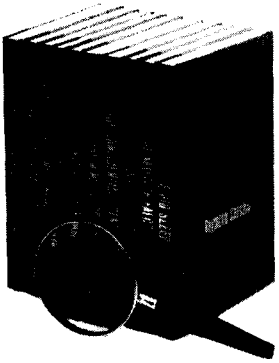

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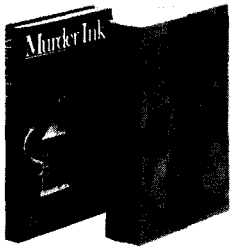

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Which one is Iris Bell?" Molly asked, studying the photo.

"She's third from the left in the second row."

"It's hard to tell anything from this. She looks like a different person. Do you remember her?"

"Vaguely. I think we had a class together. Comparative Government."

"I can't imagine you in your college days."

"Neither can I. It was a long time ago."

"What are you going to do when she phones you?"

Leopold shrugged. "Invite her over for dinner . . . ?"

TOO MANY MURDERERS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Captain Leopold was spending a quiet Saturday at home with Molly when the letter arrived. He'd lost contact with most out-of-town friends and relatives over the years and hardly ever received personal letters, so Molly expressed surprise as she sorted through the bills and catalogues and held up the envelope. "Here's a letter for you from Australia, forwarded by someone. It looks personal."

"Australia? I don't know anyone in Australia."

Molly read the return address. "Iris Seaforth, Bronte Park, Tasmania, Australia."

Leopold opened the envelope and took out a folded sheet of stationery along with a color snapshot of a middle-aged woman standing in a field with some sheep. Molly peered at the photograph. "Your friend's quite pretty."

"She's not my friend. I never heard of her." He glanced at a label

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on the envelope and saw that the letter had been forwarded by Max Schiller, a lawyer he knew.

"Read the letter," urged Molly.

" 'Dear Jules,' " Leopold began.

"She knows your first name," Molly said. "She must be a pretty close friend."

Leopold gave her a look and continued to read. " 'I'm sure you don't remember me, but we were at college together many years ago. I was Iris Bell then. Perhaps you'll remember me from the recent photo I've enclosed. I know I've changed a great deal, but I think something of my old self remains. I've asked my American attorney to forward this letter to you because I'll be returning to the States within the next two weeks—my husband recently passed away and I have some business matters to attend to. I'd like to phone you while I'm there to talk over old times. My very best wishes, Iris (Bell) Seaforth.' "

"An old college flame!" Molly said.

"I barely remember her."

"Don't you have your yearbook?"

"I was only there two years. The underclassmen didn't rate individual pictures."

"She has nice handwriting."

Leopold could see that Molly was fascinated by this glimpse of his past. He had to admit he was curious about Iris Bell himself, and later that afternoon he rummaged around until he found a box of his belongings that still wasn't unpacked after several years of marriage.

"Here she is," he told Molly. "That's me, standing in the back row."

"My, weren't you handsome!"

"Still am," he said with a smile.

"Which one is Iris Bell?"

"She's third from the left in the second row."

"It's hard to tell anything from this. She looks like a different person. Do you remember her?"

"Vaguely. I think we had a class together. Comparative Government."

"I can't imagine you in your college days."

"Neither can I. It was a long time ago."

"What are you going to do when she phones you?"

Leopold shrugged. "Invite her over for dinner . . . ?"

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The call came nine days later, on a Monday morning during the first week in February. The snow had turned a dirty grey after a one-day thaw, and the sight depressed him. But then Monday mornings were always depressing, as he looked over the weekend's violent-crime reports on his desk.

When he picked up the ringing phone he said simply, "Leopold."

"Hello, Jules. Did you get my letter?"

"Is this Iris Bell?" he asked carefully.

"Well, I'm Iris Seaforth now."

"It's good hearing from you, Iris. I'm sorry about your husband. Have you attended to your business here?"

"Not yet. Right after we were married, my husband invested in some property and I have to see to that part of the estate. I should be here a few more weeks."

"Would you like to come over for dinner some night this week?" Leopold suggested. "You can meet my wife."

"Is she someone I knew at college?"

"No, Molly's quite a bit younger than me. She's my second wife, actually."

"Well, I'd be happy to come. What night would be best for you?"

"How's Wednesday?" Leopold asked her.

"That would be fine."

"Can I pick you up?"

"No, I've rented a car. Just give me the address and I'll find you."

Molly was curious to meet this woman from Leopold's past, even though he insisted she'd never been more than a casual acquaintance, but they were both a bit surprised by the woman who presented herself at their door just after seven o'clock on Wednesday evening. Iris Seaforth was a tall woman and, though her face was familiar from the photo she'd sent, she seemed younger in person. She'd brought flowers for Molly and greeted Leopold warmly.

"You look so young!" she flattered him. "How many years has it been since—"

"Around forty," he intercepted, "and I look every year of them. But you've certainly aged well, Iris. Australia must agree with you."

"It's Tasmania, really," she said. "A separate island—almost another world. We're industrialized these days, but there's still a great deal of farmland. My husband Bob raised sheep."

"Where did you meet him?"

"We met about twenty years ago in San Francisco. He was on a

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business trip to this country. I'd just gone through a painful divorce and I needed someone like Bob."

During dinner, Iris kept up a steady stream of conversation about Tasmania. "We have the Tasmanian devils, you know," she told them. "They're fierce little animals about two feet long who've been known to kill and eat livestock and poultry. They're something like badgers, I suppose. These days they're confined to isolated areas and aren't a threat to our sheep. They had to be exterminated in Australia some years back because they were such a problem there."

Molly didn't want to hear about Tasmanian devils. "What was my husband like in college?" she asked. "I'll bet all the coeds loved him."

"*Oh,* yes," Iris answered smoothly. "And I've kept up with Jules' career since then. Remind me to show you the clippings after dinner."

"Clippings?"

"This attorney who handled my husband's affairs here has sent me clippings about you."

After Molly had served the dessert and coffee, Iris produced them from her purse. Leopold immediately recognized one story that had appeared with his picture following an especially newsworthy case a few years back. The young woman who'd interviewed him had spent the better part of an afternoon talking with him at home, and the result was the closest thing to an official biography he'd probably ever have. It had mentioned his parents, his early years in the Midwest, his school days here in the city, the beginning of his police career in New York City, and his return here as a detective captain. It even included details of his two marriages and many of his earlier cases.

"You know all about me," he said, returning the clippings to her. "Max Schiller has been quite efficient."

She smiled. "You can see why I had to look you up when I came back."

"We were never that friendly in sociology class. But I suppose Professor Dalken's lectures dulled our senses so much we couldn't think of much else."

"Wasn't he terrible?" she agreed. "At the time I thought it was me, but I guess everyone else felt the same way."

By ten-thirty the conversation had wound down and Iris said she must be going. "Thank you both so much," she told them. "If I decide to stay in town any length of time, I'll let you know. I'd love to try to repay this delicious dinner."

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"I like her," Molly decided, rendering her verdict as they returned to the living room after seeing her off.

"So do I," Leopold agreed. "But I wonder who she is."

"What?"

"I don't think she's the Iris Bell I went to college with."

It was a curious little mystery, but not one to occupy a great deal of Leopold's time. By the following week, he'd almost forgotten about Iris Seaforth—so that the sound of her voice on the phone one morning came as a bit of a jolt. "Iris! How are you? Still in town?"

"Yes, I am. But I think I need your help. I need someone who knows me and can identify me for the lawyer. I figured I couldn't do better than a detective captain."

Suddenly the picture began to come clear. But not quite clear enough. "I guess I could do that," Leopold answered carefully. "What would it involve, Iris?"

"Could you meet me at the lawyer's this noon? Or later, if that would be more convenient for you? It's Schiller & Barber, in the Temple Building. Max Schiller handled my husband's affairs in this country."

"I know Max." Leopold knew just about every attorney in town who practiced criminal law. Schiller & Barber was a relatively small firm and both partners had a diversified practice. "I could be there around one o'clock unless there's an emergency here."

"That would be fine. I'd really appreciate it."

Leopold hung up and stared at the telephone. It was a fraud of some sort and she needed identification. As she'd said herself, she couldn't do better than a police officer. He reached over and buzzed for Sergeant Connie Trent. After a moment she appeared.

"You're wearing your hair different these days, Connie."

"I needed a change. And Brian likes it this way." Brian was her boy friend, the first serious one in a couple of years.

"I like it." He paused and asked, "How's your schedule today?"

"I've got some free time if that's what you're asking."

"It's a bit awkward. A personal situation has come up that may be leading to a fraud of some sort. I know that isn't our responsibility in this squad, but I don't have enough evidence yet to call in the boys down the hall."

"Tell me about it."

He ran over the events quickly—the letter, the dinner with Iris, and her phone call that morning.

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"But you say you don't think she's your college classmate?"

Leopold shook his head. "She doesn't really look like her yearbook picture. After forty years, that doesn't prove anything, but something else bothers me. She'd read a clipping detailing my life and mentioning my two marriages, yet she still asked if my wife was anyone she knew from college. Either she didn't want to admit how much she knew about me or she was worried about confronting someone else who'd known the real Iris Bell. All during dinner she talked about her home in Tasmania and steered the conversation away from our college days. And, shortly before she left, I mentioned a fictitious sociology professor who gave boring lectures. She immediately remembered him and agreed he was boring, even though the class we had together was government, not sociology, and it was taught by a woman."

"Anyone can forget details after forty years," Connie said.

"I know, and that's why I want to be sure about her. She had a husband who died recently in a town called Bronte Park, in Tasmania. Can you telephone the police down there and see what you can learn?"

"It would be past midnight there now. I doubt if I can get any information for you before late this afternoon."

Leopold hadn't thought of that. "Do the best you can," he told her.

He picked up the phone and dialed Max Schiller's office. The attorney didn't seem surprised to hear his voice. "My client tells me you're coming in at one o'clock to help establish her identity," he said. "That'll be a big help."

"I was wondering just what that involves, Max. Surely you know who she is."

"Well, she's Mrs. Robert Seaforth, of course. She has an American passport to prove it. And she has a marriage license showing that her maiden name was Iris Bell. But it would cut through a great deal of red tape if there was someone here who could sign an affidavit. The Australian attorney sent me the necessary papers before she arrived—"

"How much money's involved, Max?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss my client's—"

"Come on, Max."

Leopold could hear Schiller sigh. "There's no cash. The portion of the estate in this country consists of uncultivated farmland in Vermont. Of course, real estate has greatly increased in value during

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the past few decades. She's anxious to sell it as soon as the transfer is complete."

"I'm not at all sure of this," Leopold said.

"Sure of what? You knew the woman in college, didn't you?"

"I'm not certain it's the same one."

"For God's sake—"

"All right, I'll be over at one. Perhaps if I see her again it'll decide me one way or another."

Iris Seaforth looked even younger than she had at dinner the previous week. She greeted Leopold warmly and turned to her attorney. "Seeing him now I'm sorry I never dated him back in school."

Max Schiller, a tall, bald man with a no-nonsense personality, shook hands and said, "Good to see you again, Captain. I hope we can resolve this matter quickly."

Leopold turned to the woman by his side. "Iris, you must realize I have to be very certain before I sign anything."

"Certain of what?"

"That you're really the Iris Bell I knew at school. It's for your own protection."

She seemed momentarily confused and turned to Schiller for help. "What does he mean?"

Schiller had reseated himself behind his massive oak desk. The office high up in the Temple Building was reflective of the man, hung with hunting prints and antique maps in slim black frames. Leopold thought he should have been born two hundred years earlier when men—even lawyers like Hamilton and Burr—still fought duels to decide matters of honor. "It's nothing to be concerned about, Mrs. Seaforth. Captain Leopold hasn't seen you in some forty years."

"He saw me just last week."

"No, I mean before that. Naturally he wants to be absolutely certain you're who you say you are."

Leopold tried smiling to put her more at ease. "Iris, if I could just ask you a few questions about our college days—"

"Go ahead," she told him. "My memory's not as good as it used to be, but I can still remember most things."

"We talked about being in sociology class together."

"Well, I didn't really remember that when you mentioned it, but I pretended I did."

"And Professor Dalken?"

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"I didn't remember him, either," she admitted sheepishly. "But I do remember you, really I do."

"Your memory's not failing that much," he confessed. "I made up Professor Dalken. Tell me something. Where was the student union located during our freshman year?"

She thought for a moment. "There'd been a fire, and while they repaired the building we had to use the library basement."

Leopold breathed a sigh that was partly relief and partly exasperation at his own earlier doubts. "Forgive me, Iris. I just had to be sure."

"Now that's out of the way," Max Schiller said, giving Leopold a hard look, "here's the affidavit I'd like you to sign."

"It would help if you could run over the entire picture, Max, just so I'm clear about what I'm doing."

The lawyer nodded. "Certainly. You see, a wealthy Australian named Robert Seaforth visited America some twenty years ago and met Iris in San Francisco. As she may already have told you, she'd been through a painful divorce and needed the sort of emotional solace he could give her. He mentioned that he wanted to invest in some American real estate and she suggested an area near here that she knew well. They came here because she'd attended college here, and I handled the legal matters for them. She mentioned at the time that she knew you, and over the years I've sent her newspaper clippings when you cracked an especially important case."

"Were you married when you bought the property?" Leopold asked Iris.

"We drove across the country in a rented car, talking about marriage all the way. Finally, we were married in Omaha because Nebraska had no waiting period. Then we came on here before he purchased the real estate up in Vermont."

"Is it in both your names?"

"No, I insisted it be just in his. He'd only known me a few weeks at that point and I wasn't after his money."

"So then you returned to Australia with him."

Iris Seaforth nodded. "To Tasmania, a place I'd hardly known existed until then. It was like paradise to me, and I discovered that Bob was a very wealthy man. His sheep farm covered hundreds of acres in the best part of the island. We had nearly twenty wonderful years together before he died."

"Iris has come back here to settle the American portion of the estate," Schiller explained. "*I* know her, of course, but we need some-

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one else to vouch for her identity—someone who knew her when she was still Iris Bell. If her American citizenship was questioned, there'd be a great deal of red tape involving the State Department."

"She didn't lose her citizenship by marrying an Australian?"

"I wanted to keep my American passport," Iris explained. "It made traveling here so much easier."

Although he wasn't completely satisfied, Leopold could think of no further reason to delay signing the affidavit. He pulled the paper toward him, read it over quickly, and added his signature.

"Thank you, Jules," Iris said.

"It's the least I can do for an old friend," he said, getting to his feet.

Later, riding down in the elevator with her, he asked how long she'd be staying in the city. "Not long now," she replied. "My friends are all back in Tasmania. Now that I've arranged for the sale of this property, I want to go back and get on with my life."

"Why did your husband keep it all these years?"

"For me, I suppose. He thought I might want to move back here someday. I don't, though."

"Aren't any of your old friends still here?"

"None that I know of."

They reached the lobby and left the elevator together. "Isn't your first husband still here?" Leopold asked her.

She nodded. "I looked him up in the phonebook. Bryant B. Brown, Real Estate."

"I don't imagine he was involved in your husband's land purchase."

"Hardly. It wasn't a friendly divorce. I moved to San Francisco to get away from him."

"Give me a call before you leave," Leopold said. "Perhaps we can have lunch if you have the time."

That night he told Molly about his day. She listened intently and asked, "You're convinced she's the woman you knew at college?"

"I guess so. She knew about the student-union fire. That wouldn't have been mentioned in the clippings Schiller sent her about me."

"Are you going to see her again before she leaves?"

"I might. I suggested she give me a call. She's staying at a hotel."

Molly said nothing more about it, and after dinner Leopold was happy to relax in front of the television set and put it out of his mind.

It was shortly after eight o'clock when Connie phoned. "What is it, Connie?" he asked.

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"I finally got through to the police in Tasmania."

He'd forgotten about that. "Thanks, Connie, but I guess I don't need—"

"You had a good hunch. Robert Seaforth is dead, all right. He died two months ago of a bullet wound in the heart. He was murdered. What's more, for a time his wife was a prime suspect in the killing."

By morning the full case report had arrived on the fax machine at headquarters. Leopold read it carefully, conjuring up a crime in a distant place he'd barely heard of until recently. Iris and her husband had lived in a large, remote house on the sheep ranch, with a foreman who handled the actual operations of the place. One night about nine weeks earlier, Iris Seaforth had telephoned the local constable to report an intruder. Her husband had run after someone in the dark and she'd heard a shot. When the constable arrived he'd found Robert Seaforth lying dead near the sheep-shearing shed, shot once through the heart at close range.

The police had conducted a full investigation, interviewing Iris and the foreman, a man named Josh McKeown. The police report seemed to go out of the way to describe him as a "handsome, muscular man in his early forties." Leopold read that part twice, and tried to imagine Iris as an adulteress. Anything was possible.

But the report went on to say that after a two-week investigation suspicion shifted from Iris and the foreman to a recently discharged employee. He was found with shearing tools in his possession that were clearly marked as Seaforth property. He claimed he'd stolen them before he was fired, but Iris insisted they were in the shed on the day her husband was killed. Based mainly on her testimony, the employee had been arrested and indicted for the crime. The indictment charged that he had gone to the sheep shed to steal tools and had shot Iris's husband when he caught him at it.

Leopold turned the page and stared at a poor-quality fax photograph of the accused, an aborigine named Jimmy Malluc. He was bothered by the fact that no murder weapon had been recovered. He turned another page and found equally fuzzy photos of Josh McKeown, Iris, and her dead husband. He found himself studying the photo of Iris intently. The poor quality of the reproduction had the paradoxical effect of removing the lines from her face. She could have been the same age as McKeown, given only these pictures as evidence.

Did you do it, Iris? Did you shoot your husband?

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It seemed odd that she'd kept the killing a secret. Still, she might have done it because violent crime was his business—mention of murder might have stirred Leopold's interest too much.

Connie appeared at the door with his morning cup of coffee. "Did you have a chance to read through that Australian material?"

"I just finished."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "I started out doubting she was really who she said she was. Now I've proven her identity and here's this new mystery."

The next two days passed quickly as he became involved with one of Lieutenant Fletcher's cases involving a drug killing. By the time it wound up, the week was almost over and Iris Seaforth had slipped to the back of his mind again.

He was locking his desk on Friday afternoon, hoping for a quiet weekend with Molly, when Connie hurried into his office. "You'd better take this one yourself, Captain."

"What is it?"

"An officer on the scene reports an apparent suicide at the Westwood Hotel. A woman jumped from the twelfth-floor window of her room. She's been identified as Iris Seaforth."

"My God! Suicide?"

"She left a note."

"Come on, let's go!"

The woman was Iris. Leopold needed only a glance at the battered body to confirm that. One of the men handed him an evidence envelope containing the suicide note. He stared through the plastic at the handwritten note. "I can't go on living a lie. I killed my husband. Iris Seaforth."

He handed it to Connie. "Check this with a sample of her handwriting. I've got one at home that Molly can give you."

Max Schiller arrived at headquarters two hours later, looking haggard. He entered Leopold's office and sat down. "I just heard the news. What happened, Captain?"

"Suicide. She left a note confessing to the murder of her husband in Australia."

"What? She never told me he'd been murdered!"

"She didn't tell me, either. I only discovered it by checking with the police in Tasmania."

"Is there any doubt she killed herself?"

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"Virtually none. We compared the writing on the suicide note with the letter she sent me from Australia. It's the same handwriting. She told me her former husband still lives here and I want to talk with him, but it seems open and shut. We're contacting the Tasmanian police."

"This certainly complicates the estate settlement," Schiller said. "I'll have to check with her Australian attorney to establish whether or not she made a new will after her husband died. Originally they probably left everything to each other. If she killed him, she may not even be able to inherit. I don't know what the law is there."

"Keep me advised," Leopold told him.

In the morning he drove out to Bryant Brown's real-estate office and interviewed him. Brown was fat and grey-haired—Leopold could only assume he'd been more appealing when he was married to Iris.

"I didn't even know she was back in town until I saw the morning paper. My wife showed it to me. We'd heard she married someone named Seaforth and moved to Australia."

"She didn't try to contact you over the past few weeks?"

"No. We didn't part on the friendliest of terms, you know."

"When was the last time you saw or spoke with her?"

"Twenty years ago."

That seemed to end it. Leopold went back to his office and tried not to think about Iris lying dead on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. He'd known her briefly forty years ago and seen her twice during these past weeks. If she'd killed her husband, she deserved none of his sympathy.

Next morning he asked Connie, "Is Fletcher in?"

"He's in court for a preliminary hearing in one of those drug killings."

"How about Tasmania? Did you get word to them about Iris Seaforth's confession?"

She nodded. "I did, but there's a complication. The person I talked with last night says they have too many murderers."

"Oh?"

"They finally located the gun that killed Robert Seaforth hidden in Jimmy Malluc's cabin, and Malluc has confessed to the killing. We've got two confessions for the same killing."

"This is growing more bizarre by the day," Leopold said.

"Could the suicide note have been faked?"

He shook his head. "You saw the handwriting comparison. She

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wrote it herself. Besides, no one here would have a motive for killing Iris. She's been away for twenty years. As far as I know, the only people she knew here were Molly and me, Max Schiller, and her ex-husband."

"Maybe she contacted some other old school chums."

"Who killed her after forty years? It's not likely, Connie. Besides, how do you explain the suicide note?"

She shook her head. "I don't, unless she wanted to kill herself for some other reason and decided to take that aborigine off the hook as far as her husband's murder was concerned."

"People do strange things," he admitted.

Later in the day Connie stuck her head in his office again. "What should we do with Mrs. Seaforth's personal possessions? She has no next of kin. Do we send them over to Max Schiller's office?"

"What is there?"

"Some clothing that was in her hotel room. A suitcase, her purse—"

"Let's see the purse."

He spread out the contents on his desk, but they told him nothing. He opened her American passport and stared for a last time at the face of the puzzling woman he'd known. He thought of the photographs in the yearbook, and on the fax machine. Now there was this one in her passport.

The same woman, or two different women?

No, he was creating a mystery where none existed. Despite his earlier doubts, it was the same woman.

Or was it? The signature above her passport photo seemed different from the one on the suicide note.

"Connie," he called, "bring me the samples of her handwriting—the letter I received and the suicide note."

When she brought them he placed them next to the open passport and asked, "What do you think?"

Connie saw it at once. "The handwriting's different. The signatures on the letter and note match, but the one on the passport was written by someone else." She was silent for a moment. Then she said, "But it had to be the real Iris Seaforth who signed her passport. They'd have checked the signature against her previous passport before issuing a new one. That means that the woman who wrote you from Australia and jumped out of the hotel window wasn't the real Iris Seaforth."

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Leopold took a deep breath. "There's one other possible explanation, Connie."

"How could there be? There must be two different women to produce two different handwritings."

"Not necessarily. Come along and I'll prove it to you."

Max Schiller looked up from his desk as Leopold and Connie entered the office. "What is it that's so urgent, Captain? I'm having a very busy day."

Leopold tossed Iris Seaforth's passport on his desk. "The signature's different, Max. You didn't think of that."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"She didn't write that suicide note, you did. And that means you killed her."

"Just a minute, Captain! Are you accusing me of something?"

"I am. If you wish to have an attorney present—"

"I'm my own attorney. What is all this?"

Leopold sat down in front of the huge desk and Connie took one of the other chairs. "You told me you didn't know that Robert Seaforth had been murdered, but that had to be a lie. Iris's Australian lawyer had sent you all the necessary papers before her arrival. In order to arrange for her transfer of that property and its subsequent sale, there was one paper you needed more than any other—a paper even more important than a copy of Seaforth's will. His death certificate. At the very least, it would have stated he died of a gunshot to the heart. More likely, it would have actually listed the death as homicide. You had to know he'd been murdered even before Iris arrived here, and you could easily have gotten the details from her lawyer."

"That hardly proves I killed her."

"No, but it tells me how the suicide note could have been faked by you and you alone. Iris sent her original letter in care of you, because naturally she didn't know my address. You must have been planning her death already, because you simply steamed open the typed envelope and had someone you trust copy that letter word for word in their handwriting. Then the letter was resealed and sent on to me. The suicide note, of course, was written by the same hand. You knew I'd remember that letter and compare the handwriting. If I didn't, you could always remind me."

"You've shown how I might have done it, but you haven't said a word about why I would have killed a woman I hardly knew."

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"I can think of only one possible motive, Max. If you were planning her death from before her arrival, it had to be connected with her husband's estate. You used your position as their American attorney to do something with that parcel of land, didn't you? If it came out, you'd be disbarred and possibly jailed. That's why she had to die, because she was anxious to have the land transferred to her name so she could sell it. You couldn't let your illegal dealing be exposed. I suppose you figured that with Iris dead the estate would drag through the courts for a few years and you'd have time to correct the wrong you'd done."

Connie broke the silence that followed. "We're checking the real-estate records now, Mr. Schiller. And we're also checking your female employees and friends to see who wrote that note. It's our guess she'd rather testify against you than be charged as an accessory."

"I used the land as collateral on a loan," Max said at last in a defeated voice. "My wife copied the letter and wrote the note. She didn't know I was going to kill Iris Seaforth. Don't bring her into it."

"Did you think you could get away with it?"

"The loan? Of course. The land had been sitting idle for twenty years. Seaforth lived half a world away and I'd heard nothing from him—it seemed the safest thing in the world to falsify a few records. I could have repaid the loan by next year and the whole thing would have been over."

"I meant the murder," Leopold said. "Did you think you could get away with that?"

"I don't know. I figured she'd probably killed her husband, so she deserved what she got."

"She didn't kill her husband," Leopold said sadly. "She only wanted to forget that horror and start a new life. But there was a murderer waiting for her here as well."

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A *NEW* short story by

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"No, I don't have a picture of her with me." They'd followed him into the elevator, Leech and Politch. Martin had seen Politch around—another young comer from the seventh floor.

"What's she do? Come on, Marty, give. Tell us about this wonder girl of yours . . ."

A MARTY KIND OF GUY

by BARBARA OWENS

It all started with Leech. Primordial slime, Leech. None of this would have happened without him. I might even have withstood him if Kramer and Politch hadn't jumped in. But when they did, after it was the three of them against me, I couldn't do it. I caved in. It was all the way back to grade school, the history of me. Everyone sets up the fat kid. What I did seemed so innocent at the time. I still don't understand what went wrong.

I never had one date in high school. Girls whispered and giggled when I walked by. A few blind dates in college, shocked looks on pretty faces when we were introduced. "What is this, some kind of joke?" one asked me indignantly. I learned to accept it, accept that I was fat and ugly, that my hair was thinning rapidly, that I was considered boring by most of the world. As years passed, I clung to the fact that I was intelligent and kind—someday I'd find a girl to appreciate that. This helped ease the loneliness sometimes. I joined a prestigious accounting firm and had been with them ten years when Leech, fresh out of college, was hired.

I recognized the look the moment I saw him. Tall, lean, graceful—white smile, thirsty eyes searching for weak spots. His kind

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always spelled trouble for me. He fit in immediately, of course, charmed everyone, made instant friends. And quickly zeroed in on me.

"What do they call you, Martin?" he asked from my office doorway. "Marty? You look like a Marty kind of guy."

My stomach tightened, but I managed a weak smile. "No, just Martin," I said.

He grinned. "Well, tell me, Marty, who are the hot women here? You married? No, I can tell you're a party animal, the guy to point me in the right directions. Who's easy and who's not?"

I felt a familiar shortness of breath. "I'm afraid I can't help you." I looked back at my work, hoping he'd see that I was busy. "I haven't dated any of the women here."

"No kidding?" He was the picture of amazement. "Then I guess you've got something better going outside."

I was a fool. I should have recognized the danger signals. Maybe I did and only dropped my guard momentarily—I really wanted to be liked.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Her name's Darlene. She's very beautiful and we're in love. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Alone in my apartment that evening, I had to smile at myself. Darlene. Where had that come from? I'd never known anyone named Darlene. But it had stopped Leech. As I ate my soup and sandwich, I tried to visualize her. Small. Blonde. A little vapid, but sweet. A tinkly laugh. That would be Darlene.

"No, I don't have a picture of her with me." They'd followed me into the elevator, Leech and Politch. I'd seen Politch around—another young comer from the seventh floor.

"What's she do? Come on, Marty, give. Tell us about this wonder girl of yours." Leech's arm was around my shoulder, all sincerity and friendliness.

Caught, I searched for an image. "She's the hostess at a little club in my neighborhood. She's, ah, studying to be an actress. Very talented. She's from Colorado—hasn't been in town long."

"Join us for lunch," Leech suggested. "Tell us more about the lovely Darlene."

Maybe I'd said too much. "Thanks, no." I left them in front of the building and made my way around the corner to a little deli I frequented. The air was cold, but the small hand suddenly clutching

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my arm warmed me. I imagined strangers smiling at us as Darlene tripped along beside me on her silly spiky heels.

After I finished my newspaper that evening, I leaned back, trying to think how different life would be if I had Darlene. It seemed a natural progression to place her in the armchair, lovely in a soft pink blouse. Her blue eyes smiled at me through big owly glasses. She could wear them with me—I was the only one she trusted with her loss of vanity.

"That was an excellent supper, Darlene."

"Did you really think so, Marty?" Marty—I'd decided I liked that. "The chops weren't too well done?"

"They were perfect. You make me very happy, you know."

Her smile caressed me. "That's all I care about, Marty. Just you."

Kramer joined the pack. I knew him slightly—he'd been a college football star. They surrounded me at the coffee machine. Two young women trainees were with them.

Leech clapped me on the back. "Marty! Been looking for you. I'm having a little thing at my place Saturday night. You must come—and bring the gorgeous Darlene."

A chill washed over me. My stammer came back. "That's very nice of you, Leech, but I can't. Darlene, uh, she's moving in with me this weekend. I'm afraid we'll be too busy."

His eyebrows rose. "Well, you devil." He turned to the women, eyes rolling. "Marty's got himself a luscious actress. You're out of luck, girls. You'll have to settle for lowly guys like us."

Kramer and Politch sniggered. One of the girls pouted prettily. I felt my cheeks burn. "Excuse me," I said, and turned away.

Leech's voice followed me. "When do we get to meet this treasure, Marty? We won't give up, you know."

The word spread. Smiles and sly looks followed me all day, and when I picked up my phone messages the young receptionist told me I'd broken her heart.

Upset, I related this to Darlene over supper. She calmed me with her sweet laugh.

"What do we care, darling? I'm sure they're all very boring, anyway."

It was wonderful having her move in with me. The apartment smelled different—fragrant, homey. She wore a soft white robe after her bath, and when I woke in the morning she was singing in the kitchen. I was so happy I had to brush quick tears from my eyes . . .

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As Christmas neared, Darlene had been with me over two months. My life was new and centered. She had given up her job at the club to care for me. She cooked and cleaned, and we spent long evenings in conversation. I had so many things to discuss that interested me, and now there was someone to listen. Her knowledge was limited, but she learned quickly, agreeing with my every observation. I ached inside when I looked at her, wondering how I'd ever lived without her.

I had attended the firm's Christmas party my first year there. The experience left me so deflated and depressed that I never tried it again. When Leech and his cohorts started badgering me about finally revealing Darlene, I was ready. Sorry, we could not attend. I was taking several days' vacation—while they were fighting slushy streets and vicious shoppers, Darlene and I would be frolicking in clean Aspen snow.

In reality, we spent a quiet holiday at home. She cooked a delicious dinner and we exchanged gifts. I gave her a beautiful silk dress that matched her eyes and she gave me an expensive smoking jacket I'd coveted, even though I didn't smoke. We had a good laugh about that. It was my best Christmas ever.

But it had a sudden ending. Leech, Politch, and Kramer showed up at my door one cold January evening. They were drunk, demanding to see Darlene. I was caught unprepared. I stammered that she was at work.

When they demanded the name of the club so they could behold her for themselves, I blurted out the first thing that came to me: Darlene and I had broken up—I was not up to company, so they'd have to excuse me, please. When they were gone, I paced the apartment, cursing my cowardice. I wanted to kill them.

Darlene was devastated when I told her. She cried and pleaded, but I stood firm. There was no other way, I told her. She must leave. Sobbing, heartbroken, she did. The apartment was cold and empty again.

For some time after that, Leech and his buddies avoided me. Possibly even they were capable of shame. I tried to adjust to a life without Darlene, but I was miserable. I'd grown used to having someone to be with, to share my thoughts, my home. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. Over and over, I analyzed the need that had brought her to me—my terrible need for someone. I'd harmed no one with my fantasy. It was my affair, not Leech's, not anyone's. My undoing

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had been my foolish revelations to him. I would be more careful with the next one.

The next one. She should be a bit more sophisticated and worldly than Darlene. More polished. And I would keep her to myself.

How can I describe Melanie? A model, quite famous. Tall, willowy, with flowing black hair and sea-green eyes. An exotic creature, ice-cool exterior with raging fires inside. We met at a fashionable uptown party and fell instantly in love. Dismissing the amenities, she moved in with me that same evening, exclaiming over the charms of my apartment. She called it funky. She adored it and she adored me. She moved like a cat and liked dressing entirely in black. Melanie mesmerized me. I thought about her constantly, rushing home each evening to be with her. She consumed me—swore she couldn't live without me. It was such a passionate period that I wondered if I'd survive.

It was noticed at the office. People remarked on how different I seemed. Leech came slithering back.

"Got a new one, Marty? What gives? You're positively blooming."

I felt stronger. "None of your business, Leech," I informed him coldly. But I couldn't resist one painful dig. "I've met a model, that's all you need to know. And don't come snooping around my door again. She wouldn't associate with the likes of you. You'd bore her silly."

When I related the exchange to Melanie, she laughed. "We only need ourselves, my darling," she whispered. She had prepared an incredible dinner for me, for which I had provided extravagantly expensive wine.

Melanie opened up new worlds for me. I explored aspects of the city I never knew existed. Shops and cafes, trendy places where the glamorous gathered. I watched how they conducted themselves, I breathed their heady air. At home, Melanie and I practiced the art of small talk, body language, and sophisticated gestures. Because she had to remain slim and shapely, she cooked foods for us that I'd never encountered. Most tasted terrible, but I lost weight and my complexion improved. I bought new clothing—fashionable "threads"—and marveled at myself in the mirror. Melanie said I was so handsome she wanted to cry.

Spring arrived in the city. My new self flowed through it with assurance. This attracted notice at the office. I was achieving flair and style. This was bound to cause resentment in certain quarters.

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One day as I related an amusing anecdote from a party to a group around the coffee machine, I saw Leech watching me sourly. When I finished, everyone smiled appreciatively. Leech muttered, "Getting a little wispy, aren't you, Marty?" I didn't care. I tossed my head and strode away.

Unfortunately, Melanie didn't wear well. I quickly tired of her shallow ways. We never spoke of anything in depth. One simply cannot adore everything, I told her, from politics to the color of the peas on one's plate. With some reluctance, I had to let her go. She begged me to reconsider, but I couldn't. She left, telling me that she adored me and would return in an instant if I beckoned.

Once again, I was alone. And very soon lonely. But I'm eternally grateful to Melanie for teaching me the social graces. Without them, I never would have known Cassandra.

Cassandra was money. We met at a horse show. I had attended with some influential friends and was enjoying refreshment in the clubhouse when a stunning redhead approached me. Pulling me aside, she murmured in a husky voice, "I don't usually do this, but I simply have to meet you. I've been watching you, and you're the most fascinating man I've ever seen."

It was that delightful arrogance of the rich that won me. Cassandra was engaged to be married, in a staggering merger of wealth, but it was only a matter of days before she was with me, shining my shoes and doing my laundry, vowing to give up every cent of her vast inheritance if she could stay. She wanted us to marry immediately, but I hesitated. Marrying her meant that I'd never have to work another day, but giving up my career wasn't something to dismiss lightly. "I might feel like a kept man," I tried to explain. "I have too much pride for that."

"Of course you do," she said. "I understand. I'll give it all to you, put everything in your name. That's how much I love you. Please, Martin—say you'll marry me."

Leech's eyes popped at my offhand announcement. "She's worth *how* much?"

I smiled. "More than you'll see in several lifetimes, my friend. And if she has her way, I'll be leaving the firm. I may even buy the firm."

I loved Cassandra, but I was troubled. She showered me with gifts and catered to my every whim. Still, something was missing. She

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began to plan our wedding. It would be an affair to end all affairs—powerful people would vie for an invitation. "I want to show everyone the marvelous man I'm marrying," she told one.

She planned to purchase an estate in the country, a home on the Riviera, and a horse ranch in Texas for our thoroughbred stock. Our honeymoon would be a world cruise on her father's yacht.

It was overwhelming. Most men would die for such an opportunity.

"I don't know, the lifestyle may be too rich for my blood," I confided to Leech at the coffee machine.

His lip curled. "I can't believe that, Marty. You're too big a man to let those millions get you down."

Someone snickered behind us, but I scarcely noticed. He had a point. I was still myself. I wouldn't change. And yet—

In the end, I had to tell her it was over. I was a simple guy, I told her gently, I didn't need money and prestige—just someone to love me and share an average life. She insisted that she'd give up all her riches for me, but I convinced her that would be foolish. We were from different worlds. Sadly, she agreed. She went out of my life with tears shining, but she went quietly. Cassandra had class.

Before I began once more, I spent a long time taking stock of myself and my life. I stopped kidding myself. In my bathroom mirror, I saw a heavyset man with sparse hair and sagging jowls. He wasn't dashing and romantic, he liked meat and potatoes on his plate. I'd hit on the painful truth with Cassandra. I was a simple guy and I needed a simple girl—no excitement, no glamor, a little boring, like me. One who loved me just because I was me.

I tried. After Cassandra, I really tried. I wouldn't let myself think old thoughts. I attempted goals, new directions in my life. When Leech harassed me at the office, I tried to rise above it, but it was hard. I was soon unbearably lonely again, my apartment so still and lifeless. And the temptation was always there to do it again.

I began working late at the office, avoided going home. I was alone at work, but then I was always alone. And then one night she just appeared. I hadn't even felt the temptation—I simply turned a corner in the hallway and she was there. And I knew immediately that she was so perfect I couldn't send her away.

Her name was Grace. She'd just joined the firm and didn't know anyone. There was nothing striking about her—she was thin and sandy-haired, wore thick glasses. A little dowdy and very shy. We talked, and she agreed to go to a movie with me. We went that very

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evening and it was nice. Not exciting—nice. We weren't a couple that anyone noticed, but that was all right. Grace was for me, not the world.

She opened up slowly. She came from a small town upstate—her most burning passion was knitting afghans. She told me about her houseplants and I told her about my collection of antique toys. I asked her out again and she accepted.

There was just one danger, a big one.

"You mustn't tell anyone at the office about us," I urged her. "Not a soul. You know how people are—there would be lots of teasing. Let's make it a game—it'll be exciting, kind of clandestine. We can laugh about what we know that they don't."

Grace colored and agreed.

Leech dropped by my office. "How's your love life, Marty? When's this big wedding taking place? Haven't heard you mention it lately."

"The wedding's off," I answered calmly. "I'd rather not talk about it if you don't mind."

A little while later, the three of them went past my door in lockstep, whistling the wedding march. I smiled to myself. Leech and his jackals didn't matter any more. I had Grace.

Grace and I went to the movies, ate out in quiet restaurants, shared hidden smiles when we passed in the office. She came to my apartment now and then, knitting while I read the evening paper. I reminded her often about not mentioning us at the office and she assured me she never would. I wanted her to live with me, but she was a proper girl from a good upbringing—it couldn't be rushed. In the meantime, we learned about ourselves and one another. Something was happening to me that had never materialized with the others.

Contentment—that's what it was. Darlene, Melanie, and Cassandra generated promises and excitement. Grace was not exciting. She'd never turn a man's head in passing, and I'm sure the girls at work made fun of her behind her back. But they didn't know her. I didn't feel the romantic passion that I'd felt for the others, but I felt something that must be love, something warm and solid and lasting. I'd made the right decision with Grace, I knew it.

She felt it, too. "I think we might as well live together, Martin," she said one evening, studiously counting stitches on her latest afghan. "We'd save money that way, sharing an apartment." Her eyes met mine tentatively. She looked beautiful to me.

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"I'd really like that," I said.

We were both blushing.

"I love you, Martin."

"Oh, yes! I love you, too, Grace."

"Now, not a word of this to anyone," I cautioned on the day we moved her things. "Promise you'll keep our secret at the office."

"I already promised, Martin. You don't need to keep reminding me."

I was ashamed of my feelings. I loved her, I knew I had finally found the perfect woman for me, but I kept thinking of Leech. After all my bragging, my wondrous tales of life with Darlene and the others, I could never explain Grace. If he got wind of it, he'd see that the whole firm laughed me out of town. No one must ever find out about Grace.

"Anything new?" he asked at the coffee machine, digging me with an elbow. "A princess, maybe? A movie star?"

"I'm avoiding romantic entanglements right now," I answered stiffly. "They seem to take too much out of me."

"I'll bet." The sound of his guffaw trailed after me down the hall.

I'd never experienced such happiness. Grace cared for me as I'd ached to be cared for all my life. She cooked food the way I liked it, shared my interests, worried about my health and well being. She didn't crowd or change my life in any way. She wore an old flannel nightgown to bed and warmed her cold feet on the backs of my legs. She had no interest in a social life, preferring to be with me. She said she'd never felt alive before we met.

"We'll want to get married soon," I told her. "Where shall we go on our honeymoon?"

Light glanced off her glasses. "Niagara Falls, of course."

"Of course."

"I'm worried about you, Marty," Leech said. "There are beautiful women going hungry out there because you've sworn off love."

"Don't worry about me. I'm doing fine, thank you."

I hated him. Hated them all. And feared them. They wouldn't leave me alone, and I'd never learned how to fight them.

We went to a movie on a Saturday night. When we got home,

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Grace made popcorn. We settled onto the couch, Grace in her nightgown, me in an old pair of pajamas and slippers.

"Life doesn't get any better than this," I said, stretching.

She smiled. "That's just what I was telling Lois yesterday. Who needs all that running around for excitement, I said. Martin and I enjoy nothing better than just a quiet night together at home."

For an instant the whole room trembled. I couldn't catch my breath. I tried to turn to look at her, but I couldn't move my head.

"Who's Lois?" I managed finally.

There was a silence. When her voice came, it was stricken. "You know Lois. At work—the cubicle next to mine."

I couldn't see—I was going blind. "At work? Our office?"

The bowl of popcorn crashed to the floor as she reached for me, kernels danced wildly across the rug. "Oh, Martin, I had to tell someone. I've been holding it in until I thought I'd burst. I *love* you—I want people to know that you love me. We can trust Lois. She won't tell—I made her swear."

I floundered, trying to pull myself up from the couch. Grace clung to me. I tried to fling her off, and felt my arm connect with solid flesh.

"You told! You promised and you told!" I couldn't get to my feet. My arm flailed, fist closed—and felt sharp teeth and bone against my knuckles. Grace cried out. Leech's face swam into focus before me. Laughing. Behind him, Kramer and Politch laughing, too.

While I was still in a crouch, I hit her again. Everyone in the office was there now, mouths gaping, braying laughter into my ears. "You had to ruin it! The best thing that ever happened to me and you killed it!" Finally on my feet, I hit her hard. She struggled weakly, cowering into the corner of the couch.

"Martin, what—please, don't!"

They crowded against me, mocking, howling with glee. Leech was bent over, helpless—he'd never witnessed anything so funny.

"Damn you! Why did you do it?" She was on the floor. Still, I kept hitting her. "You were perfect! Now you have to go! I have to start over! Grace, Grace, why didn't you listen? There'll never be another one like you!"

Something terrible is happening. I can't understand it. I'm locked up in this place and I don't know why. I keep asking to go home, but they say no. This one man talks to me—I don't know who he is and nothing he says makes sense. He wants to know all about

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them—Darlene, Melanie, and the rest. I've explained it over and over, but he keeps coming back. He tells me it's important that I comprehend. Darlene, Melanie, Cassandra—he understands about them, he says. I don't know, he must be crazy. He keeps telling me that they never really existed, but that Grace, my perfect Grace, was real.

DETECTIVERSE

AN EMPLOYEE YOU CAN BANK ON

by V. L. JOHNSON

Rosie was the bookkeeper
For a small department store—
She had the trust of everyone,
But they thought her such a bore.
All she ever talked about
Were debits, credits, money—
The subjects that excited her
And made her feel quite sunny.
Yet no one there suspected
That dull Rosie's expertise
Was juggling books (cash accounts)
And stealing dough with ease.
When Rosie gave her notice,
Her co-workers spirits sank—
It rankled them that Rosie
Was now owner of a bank.

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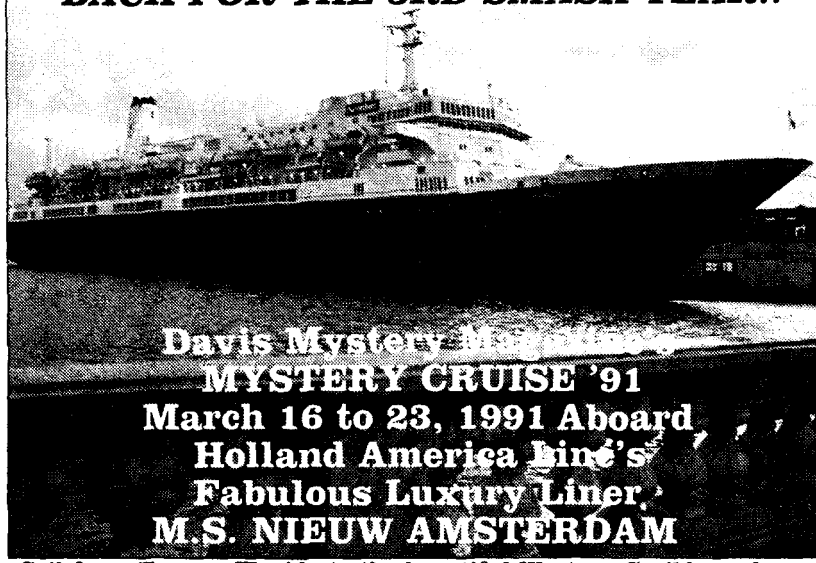

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a distinguished reprint by

ROBERT BARNARD

"I think I've got everything packed, dear," Herbert said.

Mabel sighed, gave one more venomous jab to the dead body of her knitting, and put it aside.

"You won't have. You're a perfect fool when it comes to packing. I'll have to go through it as usual. It's bad enough being left for two weeks without having to nursemaid you before you go. But there, it's always the same."

A story full of just deserts from Robert Barnard's first collection of short fiction, Death of a Salesperson: And Other Untimely Exits, *published by Scribners and described by Marilyn Stasio in* The New York Times *as "16 beastly beauties, each baring sharp teeth behind a malicious grin . . ."*

HAPPY RELEASE

by ROBERT BARNARD

"Shall I freeze the rest of the stew, dear?" asked Herbert Greenaway, gazing almost amorously at the remains of dinner.

"Of course," snapped Mabel Greenaway. "You don't think I want to eat it again tomorrow, do you?" She did not bother to look up from her knitting. Knitting for Mabel Greenaway was a kind of tribal violence, with spears. It demanded concentration.

So Herbert Greenaway got from the kitchen cupboard one of the little tinfoil containers and began spooning into it the remains of the evening's casserole. Good, domesticated Herbert.

In fact, good, domesticated Herbert did more than that. He added to the mixture one little mushroom before he finally placed the box

Excerpted from Death of a Salesperson *by Robert Barnard. Copyright © 1990 by Robert Barnard. Reprinted by arrangement with Charles Scribner's Sons, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Company.*

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neatly in the deep-freeze compartment on top of the refrigerator. Quite an innocent-looking mushroom, especially after he had cut it up and disguised its odder features. But it was this mushroom that extensive reading, and his naturalist friend Fred Prior, had taught him was the most deadly growing in the British Isles.

Herbert came back into the sitting room.

"I think I've got everything packed, dear," he said.

Mabel sighed, gave one more venomous jab to the dead body of her knitting, and put it aside.

"You won't have. You're a perfect fool when it comes to packing. I'll have to go through it as usual. It's bad enough being left for two weeks without having to nursemaid you before you go. But there, it's always the same."

For Herbert was off to the Continent on a business trip for the firm. Or so Mabel thought. So his firm thought.

In fact—Herbert smiled in voracious anticipation as he heard Mabel's heavy form heaving itself up the stairs (Herbert had always liked big women, but enough had been enough many years ago as far as Mabel was concerned)—he was running away. With a secretary. Not with *his* secretary. That would have been vulgar. And inconsiderate to the firm, to have one whole department disappear overnight. Actually he was running away with George Mason (of Business Accounts)'s secretary. With large-busted, wide-hipped, five foot nine Marcia Lemon—blonde, mascaraed, pneumatic Marcia. Herbert Greenaway flicked his tongue round his lips like a lecherous lizard.

She had arranged most of it. The false passports, the new identities, the money—all that money—the firm's money (always a *mean* firm, Herbert felt, so it really served them right). He and Marcia would disappear without trace. Leaving behind—Herbert regarded the mushroom, gratuitous as it was, as the last deed of self-assertion of a disappearing persona, one final paying-off of scores before he became, in resurrection, a new man.

And it would sit there in the freezer, waiting until Mabel's salivary juices were tickled by the thought of a nice stew, with none of the bother of preparation.

"You'll want sandwiches," said Mabel next morning. When he whimpered in protest she snapped: "Of course you will. You're not paying the prices they charge for meals on those Channel ferries."

She might have spoken more pleasantly. She felt quite friendlily

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disposed toward him. But she thought so sudden a change of demeanor might arouse suspicion in the man she intended to murder.

She cut, skillfully, thin slices of brown bread and took from the refrigerator the tin of crab paste she had so carefully doctored the day before to simulate food poisoning in those so unfortunate as to eat it. For Mabel had worked all her life in a hospital dispensary and had learned all there was to know about poisons. She had a sharp, inquiring mind that had hardly been stretched at all by her home life and the marital companionship of Herbert Greenaway.

That'll teach him to go off on trips with his fancy woman! she thought. For she had found various telltale marks and odors on his clothes, had put two and two together, and made three and a half.

She buttered the bread and spread the paste thickly, thickly, between the slices. Considerate, thoughtful Mabel Greenaway!

"Well," said Herbert, as the hire-car driven by him sped out of Dieppe, "that all went well! A piece of cake! Couldn't have gone better!"

Beside him, Marcia Lemon puffed out her bosom. "I told you there was nothing to worry about," she said.

Herbert's eyes strayed from the road, sideways and down at the bosom. It was indeed a superb bosom—mountainous, firm, and rounded. Others, others in the office, said that it was a cold bosom. In fact, the firm joke about Miss Lemon was that her best assets were frozen. But Herbert didn't feel that way. His experience of sexual abandon had not been so extensive since his marriage that he was inclined to quarrel with his good fortune.

"Golly, I'm a lucky man!" he now said.

"And I'm a lucky girl," said Marcia, with a sort of simper. But she said it not altogether convincingly. Because after all what was Herbert Greenaway but five foot six and a half of middle-aged nothing-very-much? Balding, pasty, with a moustache that would have been Crippenesque if it had grown more luxuriantly. Whereas she, Marcia—well, she was a girl who knew her own value, as well as the value of pretty much everything else.

"You organized things a treat," said Herbert. "The false passports, the car, the transfer of the money."

"Did you sign the check?" asked Marcia.

Herbert patted his pocket. "All ready here. Just waiting for one of us to go and collect. Seventy-five thousand. We'll be in Brussels

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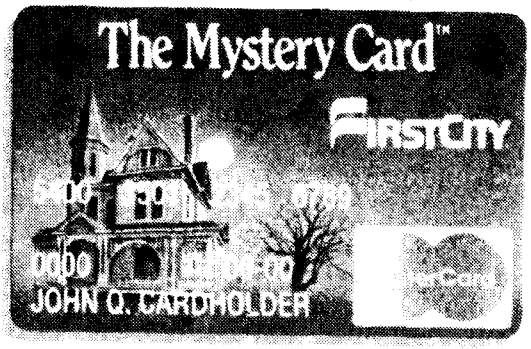

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tomorrow," he sniggered. "Seems funny to think we're going in the wrong direction."

"I told you," said Marcia, "I want us to be completely untraceable. After Newhaven we didn't exist."

"You're marvelous," said Herbert fondly, lecherously. "Feeling better? Tummy okay?"

For Marcia Lemon, who loved travel, was a bad traveler, suffering agonies of fear on planes and agonies of sickness on boats. The great motive behind her plan of escape, her new identity, was to find herself safely on that land mass which is the Continent with no reason ever to leave it to return to sea-girt Britain. With every reason, in fact, not to.

So as she had heaved and vomited in the Ladies' on the Channel ferry, as she had emptied herself, it seemed, of everything she had ever eaten, she had said to herself, over and over, as if telling a rosary, the words: Last time, last time, last time.

Now she nodded. "Fine," she said. "I'm all right as soon as I get on dry land."

Herbert was feeling happier and happier the farther he drove along the coastal roads of Northern France. Happier, and the more inclined to wonder at his luck. They were now not far from Normandy—where Marcia had once spent a holiday—and he was almost chuckling as he breathed the heady air of freedom.

"Yes, I'll say this," he repeated for the umpteenth time, "you did a wonderful job. Everything worked like clockwork."

"I'm known at the office," said Marcia, "for my powers of organization."

"But the passports, the documents, the forged driving license—I don't know how you managed it at all."

"I have friends," said Marcia.

"I bet you have. A girl like you's always going to have friends. That's what amazes me."

"What does?"

"My luck. My fabulous luck. I can't believe it. What could make a girl like you fall for an ordinary chap like me?"

Your signature, you weedy oaf. Your necessary signature on documents authorizing the transfer of funds. Your signature on checks. Your signature as Head of Accounts (Foreign). Marcia smiled down at him.

"I've always liked the mature type," she said. "Dependable. Someone I can rely on."

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"Little girl," said Herbert fondly. "Well, from now on you just lean on me. You've done too much up to now."

"You did your bit," said Marcia generously. "That time when they rang from Brussels about the transfer—"

"Oh, I knew they'd do that. So unusual a transaction. I had the story ready." Herbert was inclined to boast. "There was nothing to it, nothing at all. Feel like stopping to eat? Nice restaurant along the way? Good French *déjeuner*, eh?"

"No, we want to get on," said Marcia. "We don't want to leave any sort of trail."

"You're marvelous!" said Herbert and put his hand tenderly on her knee. Her handbag nearly fell to the floor and she grabbed it like a flash.

"Throw it in the back," advised Herbert. "You don't want to keep clutching it."

"I like to keep it with me," said Marcia. "It's got all my little things."

Like a gun, for example. Not that she intended to fire from this gun. Still, a gun may always come in handy in an emergency, if things don't go quite according to plan. And Marcia could use it, too, accurately. She had trained. Marcia, the good secretary, prepared for all eventualities.

Now they had left the low, flat countryside and were approaching the cliffs of the coast Marcia loved. Wild, dangerous country. She looked around her, remembering landmarks.

"Quite remote, isn't it?" remarked Herbert.

"That's what I want," said Marcia. "No trail. We'll zigzag back across France—through out-of-the-way places."

"Still, I don't quite see the point," said Herbert. "They'll know we've been to Brussels, and when."

"You're not the planner," said Marcia. "Darling."

She kept her eyes on the surrounding landscape. This was her country. This was where the idea had first seized hold of her. They had had to come here. It was the only place, the place she had chosen. At last, not long before sunset, she said: "There!"

"What, my little darling?"

"I'm hungry. It's all that throwing up. I'll have to have something. You've got that hamper."

"You deserve something better than Mabel's bleeding sandwiches," said Herbert fondly.

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"We're miles from anywhere. Sandwiches will be fine. Pull in here and we'll have a picnic."

They pulled off the road, and Marcia, still clutching her handbag, got out of the car and stretched.

"Isn't it lovely? Cliffs and sea and sky. We'll just sit down and have a bite, then move on."

She walked to the edge and looked over. The cliff hung over the sea: nothing to be seen below but rolling waves, blue-grey tipped with white—inviting, dangerous. Marcia had an uncontrollable, almost erotic feeling of power. She had no fear of heights, no fear of emptiness, no fear of anything.

"Don't go too near the edge, my lovely," called Herbert. He sat down fussily on the coarse grass, hoping it wasn't damp. Then he opened the little picnic basket his wife had insisted he bring.

He inspected the contents. "Well, there's plenty. Not like Mabel to make enough for two. All crab. Still, crab's always nice, isn't it? And there's a bit of cake for afters. I can't say much good about Mabel, but I will say this: she makes a lovely fruitcake." He popped half a sandwich in his mouth, and then another. "Come on, Marcia. You said you were hungry. You can't live off scenery, you know. Got to keep body and soul together!"

But Marcia had taken the heavy revolver out of her handbag and—filled with the exaltation produced by sea and sunset and the prospect of great wealth—had come up quietly behind Herbert as he swallowed the crust of his sandwich and hit him quickly and hard on the back of the head. Herbert keeled over onto the picnic hamper. Obedient, eager-to-please Herbert! Putting the revolver neatly back into her handbag, Marcia bent over Herbert's senseless body, removed his wallet and checked its contents, then took the body in her arms, walked a few steps to the edge of the cliff, and threw it over.

Herbert did not die instantly. A strong breeze from the sea wafted his body in toward the cliff face, and a lone, obstinate tree, growing in chalky soil, broke his fall somewhat at the bottom. But the incoming tide was already lapping at the roots of the tree, and one way or another it wouldn't be long.

Marcia Lemon did not even look down to see. She was possessed with a feeling of limitless opportunity. She stood alone on the cliff edge like a Greek goddess, amoral, unchallengeable. The strain of the day—the demeaning, emptying seasickness, the Customs in-

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spection, Herbert's company and fatuous conversation during the long car ride—all that had reached the logical, planned-for conclusion. The perfect secretary had planned the perfect crime. In Brussels there awaited her wealth, and after that a new identity, travel, fun, smart friends.

The beauty of her future and the perfection of her planning coalesced in her mind and drove her to new heights of exaltation. She was no longer a busty office girl, standard figure of fun, butt of lip-licking jokes. She was the perfect criminal: she was superb; she was supreme; she was unbeatable.

Suddenly, incongruously, her stomach rumbled. She looked toward the hamper.

She was also hungry.

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies a roofer, Conrad Lamb,
A roofer who gave not a tinker's damn
For what was honest or what was fair
In securing his jobs of roof repair.
Almost daily he could be found
Patching a roof that was perfectly sound—
He'd spot a house while driving his truck
Where he thought he could make a dishonest buck,
Then he'd park out front, walk up the walk,
And engage the housewife in serious talk.
"Madam," he'd say, "I was driving by
When the roof of your residence caught my eye—

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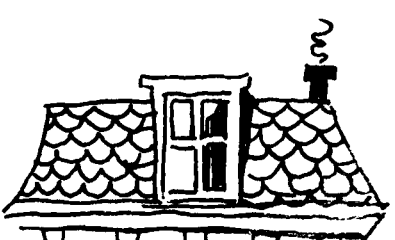
I thought I detected some loose, cracked tile
[Or shingles or slates, or whatever the style]
That will surely result in a sizable leak
When the rains arrive that are due next week."
"Oh, no!" she'd stammer with blanching cheeks,
"The last thing we need is a roof that leaks!"
He'd say, "I'll go up and inspect the spot—
I can tell, close up, if it's weak or not.
No charge to you if your roof's okay—
If not, I can patch it for you today."
So up he'd go if she gave permission,
And report that her roof was in bad condition.
Then he'd hammer and scrape and pound for a while,
Replacing the putative loose, cracked tile
[Or shingles or slates, or whatever the style]
And then, descending, he'd say, "Aw, shucks,
I'm afraid that'll cost you a hundred bucks.
But at least, Madam, your roof won't leak
When the rains arrive that are due next week."
She'd pay him the hundred with gratitude
And he'd drive away in a cheerful mood.
For years this roofer, Conrad Lamb,
Made out quite well with his roofing scam,
Till came a day, alas, on which
He fell off a roof with a high, steep pitch
And landed, kerplunk, on a concrete drive,
Which abruptly ended his being alive.
So he now lies here 'neath this slab of stone
With a leakproof roof of his very own.



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a *NEW* police procedural by

TERRY MULLINS

"I have a feeling that something's moving toward a crisis," Helen told her husband. "The attempts to get Iichi and Mrs. Gapon out of the way looks like someone is clearing the decks for action . . ."

THE MAN WITH THREE NAMES

by TERRY MULLINS

In one corner of Fairmount Park in the City of Philadelphia there is a huge statue of Moses coming down from Sinai with the tablets of the Law in his arms. At the four points of the compass around the statue are smaller but still large statues erected by the Irish Temperance Movement. These Irish temperance saints, as they are sometimes called, have long been the subject of local humor. It was, therefore, a matter of great concern to Officer Helen Sparks when, past one o'clock in the morning, she saw a uniformed police officer lying between the statues of Father Matthew, the Apostle of Temperance, and Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The officer was unconscious with an almost empty bottle of Jameson's beside him.

She had stopped her car as close to the officer as she could to go to his assistance. Sergeant Iichi was small, but he was a dead weight. Almost breaking her back, Helen managed to get him into the car. Then she radioed in, asking the operator to put the chief on. She had crossed the Schuylkill River and was halfway to headquarters before he called back.

"Chief," she said, "I've got someone here I'm bringing in to you. No one else should see him. Can you clear the way to your office?"

"Sure, but what's this all about?"

"I'll tell you when I get there. It will only be a few minutes."

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They got Sergeant Iichi into the chief's office without anyone but the radio operator knowing what was going on. By the time the doctor arrived, Helen had filled the chief in. The doctor examined Iichi and said, "He's been drugged."

"Drugged? Not drunk?"

"Yes. I'll pump out his stomach."

A frantic fifteen minutes followed, during which the chief was called out of the room. When he came back, Iichi was conscious but not coherent. The chief was grim.

"Someone called the newspapers and television stations telling them there was a dead body in front of Moses in Fairmount Park. The *Inquirer* and *Tribune* sent reporters and CAU sent a mobile TV crew. They found nothing but an empty whiskey bottle." He looked at Helen. "If you hadn't got there first— What were you doing there, by the way?"

"I was cruising City Line when the radio said there was a man holding his wife hostage in West Philly. I called in and headed there. I'd just gone through the park when the dispatcher said it was okay and I should go back. So I turned down toward the statue, thinking I'd circle it and return to City Line. That's when I saw Sergeant Iichi."

"Someone went to a bit of trouble setting this up. The hostage call was a phony. Everything's quiet there, but the call pulled cars away from the park. Iichi was drugged, not drunk. And the mass media would have had a carnival if they'd reached Iichi first."

"His eyes are beginning to clear."

"Good." The chief spoke slowly to the sergeant. "Iichi, can you tell me what happened?"

"Yes, sir. I'll try. I stop at a 7-11 store just after midnight. This is usual. There is a new man on duty alone. I talk with him and have coffee and doughnuts. Then I feel funny. He helps me into my car and that's all I remember."

The chief got the location of the store and sent a car there. Then he picked up his hat. "I want to go and talk with him myself," he said.

"I go with you," Iichi insisted.

He couldn't be talked out of it. "We'll go in your car, Helen," the chief said. "You drive."

There were two police cars and a crowd at the store when they arrived. "Robbery," one of the spectators informed them when they

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got out. Inside they found two officers guarding a body. The man had been shot six times.

"Is this the man who served you the coffee?" the chief asked. Iichi said it was. "Then it's more than funny business. It's murder."

Helen pointed to the telephone receiver dangling from its cord, making noises. The chief wrapped a handkerchief around his hand and picked up the receiver, listening a minute and then extending it to Helen and Iichi. The voice was saying, "Our CD rates this week for six-week deposits are—"

Helen recognized it. "One of those automatic bank-rate messages. They go on forever."

"But why was he calling for interest rates?"

"Maybe he wasn't. Maybe it was a wrong number. Let's listen and see what bank it is. Then at least we'll know what number he called."

Iichi interrupted. "He's a long way from the phone. Maybe someone else use it."

The chief agreed. "He was standing watching the person at the phone when someone shot him in the back. The one on the phone probably said he was calling his boss but actually called a bank-rate number he remembered from the radio."

Helen said, "Then there may be prints on that receiver."

The chief hung up gently. "We'll find out," he said.

As a result of that evening's activity, Helen and Sergeant Iichi were placed on special assignment under the chief because they were the only ones who knew the whole story of the murder. As the three of them sat in the chief's office the next day, he brought them up to date.

"Iichi was given chloral hydrate in his coffee. There are four good prints on the phone and they're not from the dead man. The dead man is an ex-con from Wilmington who specialized in knocking over branch offices of banks. The Delaware police are checking on his recent contacts for us."

"Was anything stolen?" Helen asked.

"Yes. The cash register was cleaned and two hundred dollars was taken from the safe. But that seems to have been incidental. The real motive was to get Iichi in trouble."

"Why me?" Iichi asked.

"Probably because you represent a racial minority and have just been promoted to sergeant. Even though you don't have any real minority support. You were born in Brazil and speak with a Por-

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tuguese accent, but the Latin community considers you Japanese. Racially you *are* Japanese, but the Asian community—even the Japanese—considers you Hispanic. You have no political backing. So you make a good target for *anyone* who wants to attack our policy of promoting members of minorities."

"But you said I was promoted because I earned it."

"That's right, you did. But that's beside the point as far as city politics is concerned."

Helen was unhappy with the reasoning. "This is a murder case, Chief. I can see that the stunt pulled on Iichi might fit your description, but murder wouldn't be part of it."

"No," he admitted, "it wouldn't. It could be that things got out of hand at the store." He looked for support and didn't get it from either of them. "No, I guess not. It's a possibility, but the killing does seem to have been part of the script from the beginning. Disgracing Iichi was probably the sideshow, something to raise a public stink and keep us on the defensive so we couldn't focus all our attention on the killing."

Helen watched the chief struggle. In her two years on the force, she had come to know him as a stubborn man who reluctantly let his natural intelligence and reason sway him from an innate conservatism. He had yielded late in the game to the idea of hiring according to quotas. But having yielded, he was quick to defend the policy. He was spoiling for a fight and someone knew it and was trying to take advantage of it. "I think something bigger is involved than either robbery or Sergeant Iichi," she said. "You said the victim was an ex-con."

"He spent two years in prison in Delaware."

"Who were his cellmates?"

The chief brightened. "That's a good question. I'll have the Wilmington police follow up on it."

When they broke for lunch, Helen went to her locker to get some coupons she had clipped from the newspaper. They meant a dollar off her lunch at a fast-food restaurant. Because of the delay, she left headquarters after Iichi and saw him walking toward Chinatown. Behind him she saw a shabbily dressed man who looked like a panhandler. Iichi stopped and looked at some construction work and the man stopped, too, though he hadn't anything to look at. That caught Helen's attention. She began to follow the two.

The man was of medium height. While not fat, he was flabby and

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had a beer belly. His unshaved face was pallid. His movements were abrupt and uncoordinated. He wore a grey-checked jacket and dark-blue sneakers. He made no attempt to catch up with Iichi, but followed him to the Cambodian restaurant where Iichi went to eat. Then he went to a public telephone booth and made a call.

If she had been out of uniform, Helen might have continued to shadow the man, but she had no hope of being unobserved. She would, however, know the man if she saw him again. She entered the restaurant, warned Iichi to be careful, and hurried to have her own lunch.

That afternoon brought information from Delaware. "Here are the names, photos, and records of two men the murder victim was in prison with," the chief said. "I think we can forget one of them because the other is Maxim Seljuk, a man Iichi tangled with four years ago."

Helen got no more than a glimpse of the pictures because Iichi grabbed them and began chattering excitedly. "*Bom!* I told you this is a bad man! They break into Sansom Street jewelry store and I answer silent alarm. The two of them come out shooting. I shoot and kill brother and capture this man. The judge says he is too young to go to jail. *Fora*—he is seventeen and old enough to be a burglar! But we couldn't find a gun. He had a gun—he shoots at me just as his brother does—but the judge doesn't send him to jail."

The chief looked over the records. "He was picked up a year later for another break-in—in Wilmington. That time they actually caught him with a gun and sent him to Gander Hill. He's still there, but he's due out in a couple of months. Helen, find the social worker who interviewed him when he stood trial here. Get all you can from anyone who dealt with him."

Mrs. Gapon, the social worker, was a shapeless middle-aged woman who wore khaki pants and shirt, an old army jacket, and athletic shoes. She had a firm handshake, a hearty smile, and a habit of peering intently when first meeting people. She remembered Maxim Seljuk well.

"His family moved here from Memphis about nine years ago. The three boys all dropped out of school as soon as they could."

"Three boys?"

"Yes. Maxim is the youngest, then Erich who was killed—Konrad is the oldest. He's about ten years older than Maxim. The parents are unemployed. I felt sorry for Maxim. I'm sure Erich got him into

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that robbery. Their home life was dreadful—shiftless parents living in a rundown neighborhood.

"He told me he wanted to be a writer. Here's a poem he showed me." She pulled a sheet of lined yellow paper out of a folder and passed it across. Helen read the seventeen lines of free verse and found it remarkable only for its anatomical descriptions and lavish use of four-letter words. "Scarcely Shakespeare," she said.

Gapon laughed. "No," she said, "the poor boy never had a chance. His one good line is taken from Allen Ginsberg."

Helen, who hadn't found one good line, was about to ask which it was when Gapon continued. "He kept telling me that Konrad would get him out of trouble, but Konrad never showed up. At the trial, the judge sentenced Maxim to probation, noting that it was his first offense, that Maxim was apparently just helping his brother and was not himself armed, and that his statements to the court showed a desire to mend his ways and make something of himself. He also noted that I thought his chances of reform were good if his environment was changed."

Helen was glad Iichi wasn't present. "What can you tell me about the oldest brother?" she asked.

"Not much, I'm afraid. Konrad never met with me. He remained a shadowy figure in the background. Still, Maxim idolized him. I gathered that Konrad had been supporting their parents ever since they moved to Philadelphia, but no one ever said what he did. He seemed more legendary than real."

"What are the parents like?"

"A slovenly couple nearly fifty years old. Both have dirty fingernails and they're soft-looking, as if they never exercised in their lives. Maxim was clean and in good shape—and a lot brighter than either of them."

Helen thanked Mrs. Gapon and left. A disturbing picture was beginning to emerge. She wanted very much to learn more about Konrad Seljuk.

She was sitting in her car writing up the interview when she saw Mrs. Gapon leave the office building and walk toward Market Street. The social worker hadn't gone half a block before she was stopped by a man who looked familiar to Helen. She started her car and drew nearer.

The man was the one who had been shadowing Iichi. Mrs. Gapon listened to him for a while, asked a few questions, then fumbled in

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her purse, pulled out a notepad and pen, and wrote down something the man told her. He seemed to repeat it several times and Mrs. Gapon read it back to him to make sure she had it right. When the man seemed satisfied, they parted and Mrs. Gapon headed toward City Hall. So did Helen. She parked her car in an official zone and approached the social worker. "Excuse me," she said, "who was that who stopped you just now?"

"It was Mr. Seljuk." Mrs. Gapon seemed glad to see Helen. "His son Maxim is being released from prison this week. The family wants to give him a surprise party and he asked if I'd meet him at the bus stop and delay him so that he doesn't arrive home too early."

It sounded very suspicious to Helen. "Where are you going to meet him?"

"At the bus stop near Cobb's Creek."

"That's a fairly deserted neighborhood, isn't it?"

"There are houses— What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Gapon, I may be wrong and I hope I am, but I'm afraid you're in danger. Could you come to headquarters this afternoon? I'll explain then."

There are times in police work when part of a pattern emerges which suggests a whole sequence of coming events. Helen was sure she saw such a pattern now. The attack on Iichi, the robbery, the murder, and the possible threat to Mrs. Gapon were pieces of a puzzle that suggested even more violent evil. Separately, they had their concrete antisocial character. Seen together, they fused into a potential for unlimited destruction. She was explaining her theory to the chief and Sergeant Iichi that afternoon when Mrs. Gapon arrived. Helen introduced her and brought her up to date.

"When Sergeant Iichi shot Erich Seljuk," she said, "and arrested Maxim, he interrupted an ambitious criminal process that had begun six months earlier."

Iichi said, "Erich and Maxim break in through small window high in back wall of the building. They burn through metal bars across window. When I get there, they are coming out of window. Erich is on aluminum ladder and Maxim is halfway out of window. They have musette bags full of jewels slung over their shoulders. I tell them to put hands up. Both have guns in their hands and shoot at me. I shoot back and kill Erich. Maxim says he surrenders. Other police come and we take them away. Later we come back and look

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for Maxim's gun. It is not there. But all jewels are accounted for—over half a million dollars' worth of jewels."

The chief interrupted. "That robbery was like three other break-ins over a four-month period. In one they got nothing because the owner had moved some very expensive radioactive materials to his office because he was remodeling his store. The other two netted fifty thousand dollars' worth of gold necklaces and thirty thousand in bearer bonds. We weren't able to tie those robberies in with the Seljuk brothers and we never solved either."

As Mrs. Gapon absorbed the information, a silence settled on the four. Helen understood that to Mrs. Gapon criminals were people who had not adjusted to society. They were to be helped, to be rehabilitated if possible. Helen knew that the social worker got along well with police and the courts, but it was not in her nature to consider criminals as adversaries. She had dealt with too many cases where an arrested person's rights had been abused. She had seen too many convicts who had been senselessly beaten to imagine that the criminal-justice system was inherently humane. At heart she was a shepherd rather than a hunter. Helen could sense that Mrs. Gapon was resisting the logic of the police case. The three of them sat quietly, letting the facts speak for themselves and letting the social worker grapple with the larger picture they suggested.

It was Mrs. Gapon who broke the silence. "You think I may be in danger?"

"Very much so," the chief replied.

"What do you want me to do?"

"We want one of our officers to meet that bus instead of you. When were you to meet it?"

"Tomorrow night at eight-fifty."

"On a poorly lit, deserted street at night."

"I'm not afraid."

"Before we go any further, use this phone and call the warden of Gander Hill Prison. Ask him when Maxim Seljuk is to be released. The number is here."

Mrs. Gapon dialed the number and asked the question. When she hung up, she said, "Not next week—next month." She had turned a little pale.

"You'll cooperate with us?"

"Yes."

"Would you let us use some of your clothes, something you wear often?"

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"Yes."
"And your car?"
"Yes."
"Thank you."

At home that night, Helen discussed the case with her husband. She and John had been married for five years, were buying a home, a car, and more insurance than they needed. They were postponing having children. As far as John was concerned, the most important thing about the case was that it took Helen off night duty. He hoped it would continue a long time.

"I don't think it will, dear," she said. "I have a feeling that something's moving toward a crisis. The attempts to get Iichi and Mrs. Gapon out of the way looks like someone is clearing the decks for action."

The next evening, Helen was in her car in the parking lot of a condominium on City Line Avenue. To her left she could see Officer Hans Burleigh dressed as Mrs. Gapon standing at a bus stop less than half a block away. A sort of scrub woods covered the lot behind him. In that woods, where they could see without being seen, the chief and Iichi waited in another car. Down the block a third car was parked behind an apartment garage. To her right, Helen could see City Line traffic for over a mile. It had been thinning out for the past hour. The police cars had been staked out since eight o'clock. At eight-thirty, Burleigh drove to the bus stop, parked on a side street, and got out to begin his wait. She knew he was wearing body armor, and his resemblance to Mrs. Gapon was good enough from twenty feet or so.

Eight-forty. This probably was the dangerous time. An attack would be made before eight-fifty—otherwise, the victim might not stay there past the appointed hour.

Two or three minutes passed. Then Helen saw a car half a mile away slow down to let a cluster of traffic pass. She picked up her walkie-talkie and said, "There's a black four-door half a mile away that wants to be alone. It may be the one. There are about a dozen cars together with a UPS van at the end. When they pass, be ready. The black car has dropped a full block behind them and is all by itself."

Lights out and motor running, she waited. By the time the traffic

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had passed Burleigh, the black car was a block and a half back. Then it speeded up.

"He's coming!" Helen said. The chief said he was ready. If the car slowed to a stop, they were to stay put until something happened. If it just slowed enough to let someone lean out and shoot, Burleigh was to dive behind a concrete bench and the police were to go after the car.

The car stopped and two men jumped out and grabbed Burleigh. Helen gunned her car and sped toward them. The chief's car careened out of the woods. The driver of the black car pulled away with screaming tires, leaving his two accomplices struggling with Burleigh.

Helen was behind the car and gaining. The police car behind the garage came zooming out in front of the escaping car and tried to force it off the road. The cars collided and the police car was knocked across the road onto the sidewalk. The black car spun through half a cartwheel and bent itself around a tree. Helen braked and got out. The driver was pinned against the steering wheel. He was conscious and in pain. She went back to her car and radioed for the rescue squad. Down the street, Iichi and the chief had taken care of the deserted abductors.

She got home a little before ten, relaxed, and gave a leisurely account of events to John.

"Was Konrad Seljuk one of them?" he asked her.

"No, they were three hoods from Pittsburgh who'd been hired for the job. They swear they don't know who hired them. They also swear that they were only supposed to scare Mrs. Gapon. We picked up Mr. Seljuk, the father. He says he really thought Maxim was being released early. He even showed us a letter from Maxim saying he would be on the bus at that time and place. He says the handwriting isn't exactly like Maxim's, but he hadn't noticed the difference at first. We're holding him. The hitmen say it was Mrs. Gapon they were after and verify it was Mr. Seljuk who asked her to pick up Maxim."

The next morning, Iichi brought new information. He had talked with the owner of the 7-11 store where the killing occurred and asked why the man had been on duty alone. "It's all no accident," he said. "The woman who was supposed to be there got a call not to come in. Then a man showed up looking for work. He was hired

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to help the owner who had been on duty all day. So after a couple of hours, the owner leaves the man in charge. It was stupid. But he does that sort of thing."

"Okay," the chief said, "that helps us understand what's happened. The big question is what's *going* to happen. Someone, probably Konrad Seljuk, has something in mind for which past robberies, murder, and abduction were preparation. I don't like it."

Occasionally the detective in charge of the 7-11 murder case sat in with the other three. Usually his contributions were minimal, but one day he brought them a picture of Konrad Seljuk. "It's five years old," he cautioned them, "and it's just a driver's-license photo."

The man in the photograph had a beefy face, receding hair, a powerful jaw, and large eyes that Helen classified as dreamy. The chief commented on them. "Those eyes give an innocent look to a cruel face."

It was, at any rate, a face that would be hard to disguise.

At home, Helen continued to discuss the case with John. His comments were few and his questions, though intelligent, seldom brought up anything her team hadn't considered. Yet her conversations with John were more free-wheeling than those she had with the chief and Iichi. One thing they kept coming back to was Konrad's communication with his parents. They claimed not to have seen him for nearly a year, yet the father certainly was carrying out his orders.

"You know, John," Helen said, "he could be their mailman or a clerk at the deli—someone they talk to under innocent circumstances."

"Do you have the parents shadowed?"

"Yes, and the shadowers now have Konrad's picture."

"Then he mustn't be the mailman or the deli clerk."

"No, but he might live in the neighborhood. I think I'll speak to the chief about it," she decided.

The chief took some convincing. Finally he said, "You're still unknown to the Seljuk family. You could take over for the water-meter reader and check out that block. It wouldn't hurt."

Glad of something positive to do, Helen agreed. So, armed only with a flashlight, a meter-reading recorder, and a can of mace to protect herself against dogs, she set out a day later, working the Seljuk-family block.

Two doors down from the Seljuks' house, the door was opened by

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a stocky man with a large florid face and dreamy eyes. He seemed only partially aware of her as he let her in and led her to the basement steps. He turned on the downstairs lights and followed her below.

It was a finished basement. Half of it was shut off by a cinder-block wall with a remarkably strong door. She went to read the meter at the front of the basement and he followed, standing behind her as she recorded the numbers.

"What?" he asked her. "Will you spend your life at meter-reading in musty basements?"

She was shocked. His voice was a soft, hollow, disturbing sound. She said flatly, "It's my job."

She had to edge around him to make for the stairs. He continued, "And has this sort of reading charm beyond philosophers and poets, too, that you should read mute dials and mark results for others to receive and to record and to forget? Come back again without your flashlight. Come and explore the world above this basement. We could dine tonight with candles dim if you would come."

As they reached the top of the stairs, he quickened his pace to get between her and the front door. She laughed and said, "Look out. The mace they gave me for vicious dogs probably works on wolves, too."

She held the can of mace ready and he smiled and half bowed as he opened the door for her. She read meters in the rest of the houses on the block and then went back to headquarters.

That afternoon she met again with the chief and Iichi and reported her encounter.

"I've saved the biggest find for last," she said. "The day's mail had been thrown on a coffee table by the front door. On top was a thick envelope from an Italian demolition firm." She gave them the name.

The chief looked pleased. "That," he said, "could explain where Erich Seljuk got the sophisticated tools he used in the jewelry job. It was nothing ever seen in this country before. He got through the window bars and safe door like a chain-saw going through balsa. I'll check the equipment with the Italian firm. I'll bet it's theirs."

"Will they tell you what else he's bought from them?" Helen asked.

"If the right person puts the question, they will. I'll pull a few strings."

The result of his string-pulling amazed everyone.

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Iichi said, "He must spend all his bearer bonds on this!"

The chief agreed but was more interested in what might be done with the equipment. "Someone who knows how to use this stuff could get through just about any combination of steel and concrete and do it fairly neatly. This is big-league stuff."

Iichi objected, "I see Erich and Maxim at work. They're not big league."

Helen said, "Maybe that jewelry robbery was just practice. Maybe Konrad was simply training them."

"Training?" Iichi responded. "They flunk their exam."

Meanwhile, they had been getting other information. The state motor-vehicle department reported that there were two vans and a car registered to Wat Tyler. The car was one regularly parked in front of Konrad Seljuk's house but they couldn't locate the vans. Konrad Seljuk seemed to spend most of his time in his house. When he left it, his movements were impeccable.

One night, something John said in their conversation reminded Helen of an item she had overlooked. She called Mrs. Gapon and made an appointment for the next day. She went in plainclothes and was glad she had when she saw the social worker's office. It was one of a row of cubicles with a glass wall facing the larger area where the secretaries worked. It was, however, nearly soundproof.

As they sat down, Helen showed Mrs. Gapon one of the photographs of Konrad Seljuk. She knew at once that she had scored. "I see you recognize him," she said.

"Yes—that's Sile Doty, a man I met recently. He's been asking me to go out with him. I'm divorced, you know. So far I've been too busy to take him up on his invitation, but I find him attractive. Why?"

"This man's real name isn't Sile Doty—it's Konrad Seljuk. When do you see him?"

"I see him often during coffee break. He works in the computer department."

He didn't, of course. A quick check found that he didn't work in the building at all. A few people had seen him in the cafeteria during coffee break or at lunch, but that was all.

Helen called headquarters and Sergeant Iichi posted plainclothes officers in the building. Seljuk came into the building shortly before ten, went to the cafeteria, and bought coffee and a danish. When Mrs. Gapon came in at ten-twenty, he waved for her to join him.

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They talked about fifteen minutes. Then she left. Shortly afterward he left the cafeteria and the building.

"Thanks for warning me," Mrs. Gapon said. "He wanted me to go to the Poconos with him this weekend. I suppose I wouldn't have come back."

"Not alive, I'm sure," Helen told her.

Mrs. Gapon crossed her arms across her chest. The fingers of her right hand dug into the flesh of her left arm. "I haven't had much personal life recently," she said. "My work has been everything. He was the first person in years who seemed to take any real interest in me. He has such beautiful eyes and a wonderful way of talking. I guess he took me by surprise. It's hard to see him as a killer."

"I'm afraid you didn't see him at all. He just gave you an opportunity to see the sort of person you wanted to see. In your work, you have to think of what people might be. I guess you got into the habit. He tried to take advantage of it."

"You don't think I'm a fool?" Mrs. Gapon asked unhappily.

"Not at all. Many people need trust and can be helped by it. Konrad Seljuk just isn't one of them."

The chief, on the other hand, was downright happy that afternoon.

"Iichi had Seljuk shadowed when he left. Seljuk got into a van. Its license was one of Wat Tyler's. He drove the van to the parking garage under Independence Mall and left it there. Iichi looked through the garage and discovered that the other van registered to Wat Tyler is parked there, too. And the man who's watching the Seljuk house says Konrad didn't go out all day."

"So he has another way in and out."

"Must have. Probably four or more of those houses are connected underground. With his equipment, it would be easy for this man with three names."

"I don't like the way Konrad Seljuk stalks people. I hope Iichi is careful of what he eats. They tracked him to the Cambodian restaurant, remember."

"Don't worry. Iichi talked with the owner of the restaurant. She said there have been a lot of people applying for jobs as waiters. Fortunately, everyone working in the restaurant is related to the owner. Iichi should be safe."

"Chief, I'd like to check on the ownership of the houses behind the Seljuk houses."

"Good idea . . ."

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The house immediately behind Konrad Seljuk's house was owned by Sile Doty.

Two days after this discovery, the three men involved in the attempted abduction of Mrs. Gapon were released on half a million dollars' bail each. Their trial was set for a month later. On their way home to Pittsburgh, their car failed to make a sharp curve near Laurel Summit and all three were killed. An autopsy showed that they all had been smoking crack.

"Does that set us back?" Iichi asked.

The chief thought not. "They were professional hitmen," he said. "I doubt that they would have told us anything. On the other hand, we may be able to find out where they got the crack. I suspect Konrad Seljuk supplied it."

By the time Maxim Seljuk was released from prison, the police had a good picture of the Konrad Seljuk organization. His parents and a man named Chugg worked the streets as panhandlers or bag people. There was seldom an hour when one of them wasn't loitering somewhere between the corner of Sixth and Market and Chinatown.

"And what do you suppose interests them in that area?" the chief asked innocently.

Helen and Iichi smiled. "It's the Federal Reserve Bank or the District Court House," Iichi replied.

"And," Helen added, "it can't be a simple coincidence that at least one of Konrad's vans seems to be parked in a garage across from them all day."

"Just how close is that parking garage?" Iichi asked.

The chief unfolded a map of Center City. "Here," he said, "is the U.S. District Court House on Sixth Street. Across Sixth Street is Independence Mall, a long empty park going from Race Street to Chestnut. But under the Mall is that huge parking garage. At one place, it's surprisingly close to the basement of the Court House—and in that basement ten million dollars' worth of confiscated drugs are being held until the case goes to trial later this year. And the vans registered to Wat Tyler are always parked in the part of the garage nearest the Court House."

Iichi gave a long thoughtful whistle.

Helen asked if they had checked whether any of the Seljuk organization had been *in* the Court House.

"We asked around," the chief told her. "We showed pictures of all the suspects. None of them has been seen in there recently, but one

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secretary said she thought she recognized the picture of Konrad Seljuk. About a year ago, she was coming out of the stairwell and bumped the door into a man standing beside it arguing with a guard. She was impressed by the man's eyes and says she's sure it was Konrad Seljuk, though the guard ushered the man out and she didn't get a really good look at him. None of the guards there now remembers the incident."

"Chief, I'd like to look around in that garage," Helen said.

He nodded. "I think the three of us should dress in plainclothes and check it out. Let's plan to go after lunch."

Dressed as tourists and carrying cameras, the three had lunch together at Iichi's Cambodian restaurant. Helen and the chief ordered satay and sliced spiced beef while Iichi ordered his usual Cambodian curry, rice, and barbecued shrimp wrapped around a sugar cane. Midway into the meal the chief asked, "Is this your usual waiter, Iichi?"

"Yes. The owner said she'd tell me if they changed any personnel for any reason."

"I'm glad to hear it. The food is so highly seasoned it could hide the taste of any known poison."

"And," Helen added, "tainted seafood can be as deadly as most poisons. You couldn't detect it."

"Maldito seja!" Iichi grumbled. "I'm glad I don't eat with you two all the time."

After lunch, they walked to the garage. The chief led them to the part of the garage nearest the Court House. All the spaces were filled, but one section had been blocked off for repair work. A large section of the wall was covered with plywood and a canvas tarpaulin.

They kept going. "There's work being done behind that tarp," said Helen.

"Let's get back to headquarters right away," the chief said. "Both Wat Tyler vans are parked down here."

At headquarters, he quickly organized a SWAT team. Carrying shields and wearing body armor, Helen and Iichi joined them. They covered the short distance back to the garage swiftly but silently.

The silence was broken as they pulled up inside the garage. A grubby woman—the Seljuks' mother?—suddenly popped up in the front seat of one of the vans and blew several long blasts on the horn. She was pulled out of the van and arrested, but the warning

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had its effect. From behind the plywood and canvas, four men came out firing automatic weapons and throwing smoke bombs.

The police dove for cover. The chief shouted, "Give up—you're surrounded!" and was met by a stream of bullets from two directions. Iichi leaned over the front of Helen's car and fired a single shot. One man fell and the rest jumped behind a van, still spraying bullets in a wide semicircle.

There followed fifteen to twenty minutes of intermittent shouting and shooting. Police reinforcements and firefighters arrived, but they were kept busy preventing curious citizens from rushing into the battlefield for a first-hand look at a police shootout.

Finally, Iichi lay flat on his stomach and crawled under Helen's bullet-riddled car. From there he fired three shots and hit three legs. Two of them belonged to Maxim Seljuk and one to his father. They surrendered at once, screaming and calling for a doctor. Konrad Seljuk cursed and tried to break for the fire exit. He didn't make it.

Two days later, the chief, Helen, and Sergeant Iichi explained to five very interested FBI investigators how the Seljuks' imported equipment worked.

That night Helen explained it to John. "They got right up to the basement wall of the bank," she said. "They'd been hauling debris away in the vans, of course."

"And now you're working on the day shift at a desk job," he added.

"Only until the car is fixed, dear." She ruffled his hair. "Only until the car is fixed."

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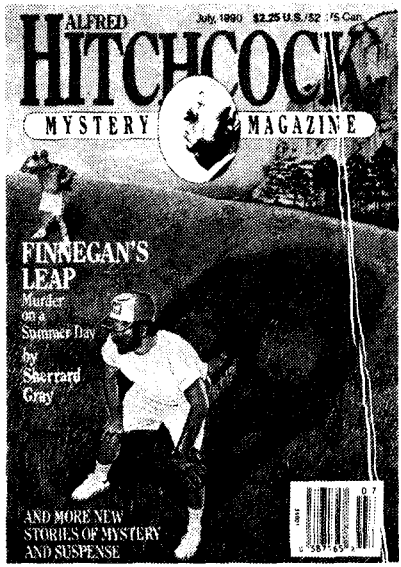

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RICHARD BAUSCH

"Where you from, Mcrae?" she said.

"Washington, D.C."

"Long way from home."

"I haven't been there in years."

"Where have *you been?"*

"Prison," he said. He hadn't known he would say it, and now that he had, he kept his eyes on the road.

"The Man Who Knew Belle Starr" is from Spirits and Other Stories, *the first collection of short stories by Richard Bausch, author of* Real Presence, *a novel James Dickey called "a unique and stunning performance,"* Take Me Back—*"A seamless and perfectly wrought novel," PEN/Faulkner Award citation—and* The Last Good Time, *described by Walker Percy as "a triumph—a wonderful job, a deeply moving novel."*

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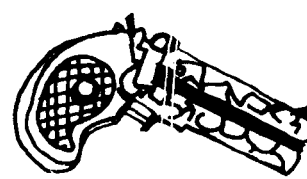

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THE MAN WHO KNEW BELLE STARR

by RICHARD BAUSCH

Mcrae picked up a hitcher on his way West. It was a young woman, carrying a paper bag and a leather purse, wearing jeans and a shawl—which she didn't take off, though it was more than ninety degrees out and Mcrae had no air conditioning. He was driving an old Dodge Charger with a bad exhaust system and one long crack in the wraparound windshield. He pulled over for her and she got right in, set the leather purse on the seat between them, and settled herself with the paper bag on her lap between her hands. He had just crossed into Texas.

"Where you headed?" he said.

She said, "What about you?"

"Nevada, maybe."

"Why maybe?"

And that fast he was answering *her* questions. "I just got out of the Air Force," he told her, though this wasn't exactly true. The Air Force had put him out with a dishonorable discharge after three years at Leavenworth for beating up a staff sergeant. He was a bad character. He had a bad temper that had got him into a load of trouble already and he just wanted to get out West, out to the wide-open spaces. It was just to see it, really. He had the feeling people didn't require as much from a person way out where there was that kind of room. He didn't have any family now. He had five thousand dollars from his father's insurance policy and he was going to make the money last him a while. He said, "I'm sort of undecided about a lot of things."

"Not me," she said.

"You figured out where you were going," he said.

"You could say that."

"So where might that be?"

She made a fist and then extended her thumb and turned it over. "Under," she said; "down."

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"Excuse me?"

"Does the radio work?" she asked, reaching for it.

"It's on the blink," he said.

She turned the knob anyway, then sat back and folded her arms over the paper bag.

He took a glance at her. She was skinny and long-necked, and her hair was the color of water in a metal pail. She looked just old enough for high school.

"What's in the bag?" he said.

She sat up a little. "Nothing. Another blouse."

"Well, so what did you mean back there?"

"Back where?"

"Look," he said, "we don't have to do any talking if you don't want to."

"Then what will we do?"

"Anything you want," he said.

"What if I just want to sit here and let you drive me all the way to Nevada?"

"That's fine," he said. "That's just fine."

"Well, I won't do that. We can talk."

"Are *you* going to Nevada?" he asked.

She gave a little shrug of her shoulders. "Why not?"

"All right," he said, and for some reason he offered her his hand. She looked at it, and then smiled at him, and he put his hand back on the wheel.

It got a little awkward almost right away. The heat was awful, and she sat there sweating, not saying much. He never thought he was very smooth or anything, and he had been in prison: it had been a long time since he had found himself in the company of a woman. Finally she fell asleep, and for a few miles he could look at her without worrying about anything but staying on the road. He decided that she was kind of good-looking around the eyes and mouth. If she ever filled out, she might be something. He caught himself wondering what might happen, thinking of sex. A girl who traveled alone like this was probably pretty loose. Without quite realizing it, he began to daydream about her, and when he got aroused by the daydream he tried to concentrate on figuring his chances, playing his cards right, not messing up any opportunities—but being gentlemanly, too. He was not the sort of person who forced himself on young women. She slept very quietly, not breathing loudly or

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sighing or moving much; and then she simply sat up and folded her arms over the bag again and stared out at the road.

"God," she said, "I went out."

"You hungry?" he asked.

"No."

"What's your name?" he said. "I never got your name."

"Belle Starr," she said, and, winking at him, she made a clicking sound out of the side of her mouth.

"Belle Starr," he said.

"Don't you know who Belle Starr was?"

All he knew was that it was a familiar-sounding name. "Belle Starr."

She put her index finger to the side of his head and said, "Bang."

"Belle Starr," he said.

"Come on," she said. "Annie Oakley. Wild Bill Hickok."

"Oh," Mcrae said. "Okay."

"That's me," she said, sliding down in the seat. "Belle Starr."

"That's not your real name."

"It's the only one I go by these days."

They rode on in silence for a time. "What's *your* name?" she said.

He told her.

"Irish?"

"I never thought about it."

"Where you from, Mcrae?"

"Washington, D.C."

"Long way from home."

"I haven't been there in years."

"Where *have* you been?"

"Prison," he said. He hadn't known he would say it, and now that he had, he kept his eyes on the road. He might as well have been posing for her; he had an image of himself as he must look from the side, and he shifted his weight a little, sucked in his belly. When he stole a glance at her he saw that she was simply gazing out at the Panhandle, one hand up like a visor to shade her eyes.

"What about you?" he said, and felt like somebody in a movie—two people with a past come together on the open road. He wondered how he could get the talk around to the subject of love.

"What *about* me?"

"Where're you from?"

"I don't want to bore you with all the facts," she said.

"I don't mind," Mcrae said. "I got nothing else to do."

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"I'm from way up North."

"Okay," he said, "you want me to guess?"

"Maine," she said. "Land of Moose and Lobster."

He said, "Maine. Well, now."

"See? The facts are just a lot of things that don't change."

"Unless you change them," Mcrae said.

She reached down and, with elaborate care, as if it were fragile, put the paper bag on the floor. Then she leaned back and put her feet up on the dash. She was wearing low-cut tennis shoes.

"You going to sleep?" he asked.

"Just relaxing," she said.

But a moment later, when he asked if she wanted to stop and eat, she didn't answer, and he looked over to see that she was sound asleep.

His father had died while he was at Leavenworth. The last time Mcrae saw him, he was lying on a gurney in one of the bays of D.C. General's emergency ward, a plastic tube in his mouth, an IV set into an ugly yellow-blue bruise on his wrist. Mcrae had come home on his first leave from the Air Force—which he had joined at the order of a juvenile judge—to find his father on the floor in the living room, in a pile of old newspapers and bottles, wearing his good suit, with no socks or shoes and no shirt. It looked as if he were dead. But the ambulance drivers found a pulse and rushed him off to the hospital. Mcrae cleaned the house up a little and then followed in the Charger. The old man had been steadily going downhill from the time Mcrae was a boy and so this latest trouble wasn't new.

In the hospital, they got the tube into his mouth and hooked him to the IV, and then left him there on the gurney. Mcrae stood at his side, still in uniform, and when the old man opened his eyes and looked at him it was clear that he didn't know who it was. The old man blinked, stared, and then sat up, took the tube out of his mouth, and spat something terrible-looking into a small metal dish which was suspended from the complicated apparatus of the room and made a continual water-dropping sound like a leaking sink. He looked at Mcrae again, and then he looked at the tube. "Jesus Christ," he said.

"Hey," Mcrae said.

"What?"

"It's me."

The old man put the tube back into his mouth and looked away.

"Pops," Mcrae said. He didn't feel anything.

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The tube came out. "Don't look at me, boy. You got yourself into it. Getting into trouble, stealing and running around. You got yourself into it."

"I don't mind it, Pops. It's three meals and a place to sleep."

"Yeah," the old man said, and then seemed to gargle something. He spit into the little metal dish again.

"I got thirty days of leave, Pops."

"Eh?"

"I don't have to go back for a month."

"Where you going?"

"Around," Mcrae said.

The truth was that he hated the Air Force, and he was thinking of taking the Charger and driving to Canada or someplace like that and hiding out the rest of his life—the Air Force felt like punishment, it *was* punishment, and he had already been in trouble for his quick temper and his attitude.

That afternoon, he'd left his father to whatever would happen, got into the Charger, and started North. But he hadn't made it. He'd lost heart a few miles south of New York City, and he turned around and came back. The old man had been moved to a room in the alcoholic ward, but Mcrae didn't go to see him. He stayed in the house, watching television and drinking beer, and when old high-school buddies came by he went around with them a little. Mostly he stayed home, though, and at the end of his leave he locked the place and drove back to Chanute, in Illinois where he was stationed. He wasn't there two months before the staff sergeant caught him drinking beer in the dayroom of one of the training barracks and asked for his name. Mcrae walked over to him, said, "My name is trouble," and at the word *trouble*, struck the other man in the face. He'd had a lot of beer, and he had been sitting there in the dark, drinking the last of it, going over everything in his mind, and the staff sergeant, a baby-faced man with a spare tire of flesh around his waist and an attitude about the stripes on his sleeves, had just walked into it. Mcrae didn't even know him. Yet he stood over him where he had fallen, and then he found himself kicking him. It took two other men to get him off the poor man, who wound up in the hospital with a broken jaw (the first punch had done it), a few cracked ribs, and multiple lacerations and bruises.

The court-martial was swift. The sentence was three years at hard labor, along with the dishonorable discharge. He'd had less than a month to go on the sentence when he got the news about his father.

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He felt no surprise, nor, really, any grief; yet there was a little thrill of something like fear. He was in his cell, and for an instant some part of him actually wanted to remain there, inside walls, where things were certain and there weren't any decisions to make. A week later, he learned of the money from the insurance, which would have been more than the five thousand except that his father had been a few months behind on the rent, and on other payments. Mcrae settled what he had to of those things and kept the rest. He had started to feel like a happy man, out of Leavenworth and the Air Force, and now he was on his way to Nevada or someplace like that—and he had picked up a girl.

He drove on until dusk, stopping only for gas, and the girl slept right through. Just past the line into New Mexico, he pulled off the interstate and went north for a mile or so, looking for someplace other than a chain restaurant to eat. She sat up straight, pushed the hair back away from her face. "Where are we?"

"New Mexico," he said. "I'm looking for a place to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Well," he said, "*you* might be able to go all day without anything to eat, but I got a three-meal-a-day habit to support."

She brought the paper bag up from the floor and held it in her lap.

"You got food in there?" he asked.

"No."

"You're very pretty—childlike, sort of—when you sleep."

"I didn't snore?"

"You were quiet as a mouse."

"And you think I'm pretty?"

"I guess you know a thing like that. I hope I didn't offend you."

"I don't like dirty remarks," she said. "But I don't guess you meant to be dirty."

"Dirty."

"Sometimes people can say a thing like that and mean it very dirty, but I could tell you didn't."

He pulled in at a roadside diner and turned off the ignition. "Well?" he said.

She sat there with the bag on her lap. "I don't think I'll go in with you."

"You can have a cold drink or something," he said.

"You go in. I'll wait out here."

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"Come on in there with me and have a cold drink," Mcrae said. "I'll buy it for you. I'll buy you dinner if you want."

"I don't want to," she said.

He got out and started for the entrance, and before he reached it he heard her door open and close, and turned to watch her come toward him, thin and waiflike in the shawl, which hid her arms and hands.

The diner was empty. There was a long low bar, with soda fountains on the other side of it, and glass cases in which pies and cakes were set; and there were booths along one wall. Everything seemed in order, except that no one was around. Mcrae and the girl stood in the doorway for a moment and waited, and finally she stepped in and took a seat in the first booth. "I guess we're supposed to seat ourselves," she said.

"This is weird," said Mcrae.

"Hey," she said, rising, "there's a jukebox." She strode over to it and leaned on it, crossing one leg behind the other at the ankle, her hair falling down to hide her face.

"Hello?" Mcrae said. "Anybody here?"

"Got any change?" asked the girl.

He gave her a quarter and then sat at the bar. The door at the far end swung in and a big red-faced man entered, wearing a white cook's apron over a sweat-stained baby-blue shirt whose sleeves he had rolled up past the meaty curve of his elbows. "Yeah?" he said.

"You open?" Mcrae asked.

"That jukebox don't work, honey," the man said.

"You open?" Mcrae said as the girl came and sat down beside him.

"Sure, why not?"

"Place is kind of empty."

"What do you want to eat?"

"You got a menu?"

"You want a menu?"

"Sure," Mcrae said, "why not?"

"Truth is," the big man said, "I'm selling this place. I don't have menus any more. I make hamburgers and breakfast stuff. Some french fries and cold drinks. A hot dog maybe. I'm not keeping track."

"Let's go somewhere else," the girl said.

"Yeah," said the big man, "why don't you do that?"

"Look," said Mcrae, "what's the story here?"

The other man shrugged. "You came in at the end of the run, you

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know what I mean? I'm going out of business. Sit down and I'll make you a hamburger on the house."

Mcrae looked at the girl.

"Okay," she said, in a tone which made it clear that she would've been happier to leave.

The big man put his hands on the bar and leaned toward her. "Miss, if I were you I wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"I don't like hamburger," she said.

"You want a hot dog?" the man said. "I got a hot dog for you. Guaranteed to please."

"I'll have some french fries," she said.

The big man turned to the grill and opened the metal drawer under it. He was very wide at the hips and his legs were like trunks. "I get out of the Army after twenty years," he said, "and I got a little money put aside. The wife and I decide we want to get into the restaurant business. The government's going to be paying me a nice pension and we got the savings, so we sink it all in this goddamn diner. Six and a half miles from the interstate. You get the picture? The guy's selling us this diner at a great price, you know? A terrific price. For a song, I'm in the restaurant business. The wife will cook the food and I'll wait tables, you know, until we start to make a little extra, and then we'll hire somebody—a high-school kid or somebody like that. We might even open another restaurant if the going gets good enough. But, of course, this is New Mexico. This is six and a half miles from the interstate. There's nothing here any more because there's nothing up the road. You know what's up the road? Nothing."

He had put the hamburger on, and a basket of frozen french fries.

"Now the wife decides she's had enough of life on the border, and off she goes to Seattle to sit in the rain with her mother and here I am trying to sell a place nobody else is dumb enough to buy. You know what I mean?"

"That's rough," Mcrae said.

"You're the second customer I've had all *week*, bub."

The girl said, "I guess that cash register's empty then, huh?"

"It ain't full, honey."

She got up and wandered across the room. For a while she stood gazing out the windows over the booths, her hands invisible under the woolen shawl. When she came back to sit next to Mcrae again, the hamburger and french fries were ready.

"On the house," the big man said.

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And the girl brought a gun out of the shawl—a pistol that looked like a toy. "Suppose you open up that register, Mr. Poormouth," she said.

The big man looked at her, then at Mcrae, who had taken a large bite of his hamburger and had it bulging in his cheeks.

"This thing is loaded and I'll use it."

"Well, for Christ's sake," the big man said.

Mcrae started to get off the stool. "Hold on a minute," he said to them both, his words garbled by the mouthful of food, and then everything started happening all at once. The girl aimed the pistol, there was a popping sound—a single, small pop, not much louder than the sound of a cap gun—and the big man took a step back against the counter, into the dishes and pans there. He stared at the girl, wide-eyed, for what seemed a long time, then went down, pulling dishes with him in a tremendous shattering.

"Jesus Christ!" Mcrae said, swallowing, standing back from her, raising his hands.

She put the pistol back in her jeans under the shawl and then went around the counter and opened the cash register.

"Damn," she said.

Mcrae said, low, "Jesus Christ."

And now she looked at him—it was as if she had forgotten he was there. "What're you standing there with your hands up like that?"

"God," he said. "Oh, God."

"Stop it," she said. "Put your hands down."

He did so.

"Cash register's empty." She sat down on one of the stools and gazed over at the body of the man where it had fallen. "Damn."

"Look," Mcrae said, "take my car. You—you can have my car."

She seemed puzzled. "I don't want your car. What do I want your car for?"

"You—" he said. He couldn't talk, couldn't focus clearly, or think. He looked at the man, who lay very still, and then he began to cry.

"Will you stop it?" she said, coming off the stool, reaching under the shawl and bringing out the pistol again.

"Jesus," he said. "Good Jesus."

She pointed the pistol at his forehead. "Bang," she said. "What's my name?"

"Your name?"

"My name."

"Belle—" he managed.

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"Come on," she said. "The whole thing—you remember."

"Belle—Belle Starr."

"Right." She let the gun hand drop to her side, into one of the folds of the shawl. "I like that so much better than Annie Oakley."

"Please," Mcrae said.

She took a few steps away from him and then whirled and aimed the gun. "I think we better get out of here, what do you think?"

"Take the car," he said, almost with exasperation. It frightened him to hear it in his own voice.

"I can't drive," she said simply. "Never learned."

"Jesus," he said. It went out of him like a sigh.

"God," she said, gesturing with the pistol for him to move to the door, "it's hard to believe you were ever in *prison*."

The road went on into the dark, beyond the fan of the headlights. He lost track of miles, road signs, other traffic, time. Trucks came by and surprised him, and other cars seemed to materialize as they started the lane change that would bring them over in front of him. He watched their taillights grow small in the distance, and all the while the girl sat watching him, her hands somewhere under the shawl. For a long time there was just the sound of the rushing night air at the windows, and then she moved a little, shifted her weight, bringing one leg up on the seat.

"What were you in prison for, anyway?"

Her voice startled him, and for a moment he couldn't think to answer.

"Come on," she said, "I'm getting bored with all this quiet. What were you in prison for?"

"I—beat up a guy."

"That's all?"

"Yes, that's all." He couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice.

"Tell me about it."

"It was just—I just beat up a guy. It wasn't anything."

"I didn't shoot that man for money, you know."

Mcrae said nothing.

"I shot him because he made a nasty remark to me about the hot dogs."

"I didn't hear any nasty remark."

"He shouldn't have said it or else he'd still be alive."

Mcrae held tight to the wheel.

"Don't you wish it was the Wild West?" she said.

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"Wild West," he said, "yeah." He could barely speak for the dryness in his mouth and the deep ache of his own breathing.

"You know," she said, "I'm not really from Maine."

He nodded.

"I'm from Florida."

"Florida," he managed.

"Yes. Only I don't have a Southern accent, so people think I'm not from there. Do you hear any trace of a Southern accent at all when I talk?"

"No," he said.

"Now you—you've got an accent. A definite Southern accent."

He was silent.

"Talk to me," she said.

"What do you want me to say?" he said. "Jesus."

"You could ask me things."

"Ask you things—"

"Ask me what my name is."

Without hesitating, Mcrae said, "What's your name?"

"You know."

"No, really," he said, trying to play along.

"It's Belle Starr."

"Belle Starr," he said.

"Nobody *but*," she said.

"Good," he said.

"And I don't care about money, either," she said. "That's not what I'm after."

"No," Mcrae said.

"What I'm after is adventure."

"Right," said Mcrae.

"Fast living."

"Fast living, right."

"A good time."

"Good," he said.

"I'm going to live a ton before I die."

"A ton, yes."

"What about you?" she said.

"Yes," he said, "me, too."

"Want to join up with me?"

"Join up," he said. "Right." He was watching the road.

She leaned toward him a little. "Do you think I'm lying about my name?"

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"No."

"Good," she said.

He had begun to feel as though he might start throwing up what he'd had of the hamburger. His stomach was cramping on him and he was dizzy. He might even be having a heart attack.

"Your eyes are big as saucers," she said.

He tried to narrow them a little. His whole body was shaking now.

"You know how old I am, Mcrae? I'm nineteen."

He nodded, glanced at her and then at the road again.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"Do you believe people go to heaven when they die?"

"Oh, God," he said.

"Look, I'm not going to shoot you while you're driving the car. We'd crash if I did that."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, Jesus, please—look, I never saw anybody shot before—"

"Will you *stop it?*"

He put one hand to his mouth. He was soaked. He felt the sweat on his upper lip and then he felt the dampness all through his clothes.

She said, "I don't kill everybody I meet, you know."

"No," he said. "Of course not." The absurdity of this exchange almost brought a laugh up out of him. It was astonishing that such a thing as a laugh could be anywhere in him at such a time, but here it was, rising up in his throat like some loosened part of his anatomy. He held on with his whole mind, and it was a moment before he realized that *she* was laughing.

"Actually," she said, "I haven't killed all that many people."

"How—" he began. Then he had to stop to breathe. "How many?"

"Take a guess."

"I don't have any idea," he said.

"Well," she said, "you'll just have to guess. And you'll notice that I haven't spent any time in prison."

He was quiet.

"*Guess,*" she said.

Mcrae said, "Ten?"

"No."

He waited.

"Come on, keep guessing."

"More than ten?"

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"Well, all right. Less than ten."

"Less than ten," he said.

"Guess," she said.

"Nine."

"No."

"Eight."

"No, not eight."

"Six?"

"Not six."

"Five?"

"Five and a half people," she said. "You almost hit it right on the button."

"Five and a half people," said Mcrae.

"Right. A kid who was hitchhiking, like me. A guy at a gas station. A dog that must've got lost—I count him as the half. Another guy at a gas station. A guy that took me to a motel and made an obscene gesture to me. And the guy at the diner. That makes five and a half."

"Five and a half," Mcrae said.

"You keep repeating everything I say. I wish you'd quit that."

He wiped his hand across his mouth and then feigned a cough to keep from having to speak.

"Five and a half people," she said, turning a little in the seat, putting her knees up on the dash. "Have you ever met anybody like me? Tell the truth."

"No," Mcrae said, "nobody."

"Just think about it, Mcrae. You can say you rode with Belle Starr. You can tell your grandchildren."

He was afraid to say anything to this, for fear of changing the delicate balance of the thought. Yet he knew the worst mistake would be to say nothing at all. He was beginning to feel something of the cunning that he would need to survive, even as he knew the slightest miscalculation would mean the end of him. He said, with fake wonder, "I knew Belle Starr."

She said, "Think of it."

"Something," he said.

And she sat farther down in the seat. "Amazing."

He kept to fifty-five miles an hour. Everyone else was speeding. The girl sat straight up now, nearly facing him on the seat. For long

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periods she had been quiet, simply watching him drive, and soon they were going to need gas. There was now less than half a tank.

"Look at these people speeding," she said. "We're the only ones obeying the speed limit. Look at them."

"Do you want me to speed up?" he asked.

"I think they ought to get tickets for speeding, that's what I think. Sometimes I wish I was a policeman."

"Look," Mcrae said, "we're going to need gas pretty soon."

"No, let's just run it until it quits. We can always hitch a ride with somebody."

"This car's got a great engine," Mcrae said. "We might have to outrun the police and I wouldn't want to do that in any other car."

"This old thing? It's got a crack in the windshield. The radio doesn't work."

"Right. But it's a fast car. It'll outrun a police car."

She put one arm over the back seat and looked out the rear window. "You really think the police are chasing us?"

"They might be," he said.

She stared at him a moment. "No. There's no reason. Nobody saw us."

"But if somebody did—this car, I mean, it'll go like crazy."

"I'm afraid of speeding, though," she said. "Besides, you know what I found out? If you run slow enough the cops go right past you. Right on past you looking for somebody who's in a hurry. No, I think it's best if we just let it run until it quits and then get out and hitch."

Mcrae thought he knew what might happen when the gas ran out. She'd make him push the car to the side of the road, and then she'd walk him back into the cactus and brush there, and when they were far enough from the road she'd shoot him. He knew this as if she'd spelled it all out, and he began again to try for the cunning he would need. "Belle," he said, "why don't we lay low for a few days in Albuquerque?"

"Is that an obscene gesture?" she said.

"No!" he said, almost shouted. "No! That's—it's outlaw talk. You know. Hide out from the cops—lay low. It's—it's prison talk."

"Well, I've never been in prison."

"That's all I meant."

"You want to hide out?"

"Right," he said.

"You and me?"

"You—you asked if I wanted to join up with you."

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"Did I?" She seemed puzzled by this.

"Yes," he said, feeling himself press it a little. "Don't you remember?"

"I guess I do."

"You did," he said.

"I don't know."

"Belle Starr had a gang," he said.

"She did."

"I could be the first member of your gang."

She sat there thinking this over. Mcrae's blood moved at the thought that she was deciding whether or not he would live. "Well," she said, "maybe."

"You've got to have a gang, Belle."

"We'll see," she said.

A moment later, she said, "How much money do you have?"

"I have enough to start a gang."

"It takes money to start a gang?"

"Well—" He was at a loss.

"How much do you have?"

He said, "A few hundred."

"Really?" she said. "That much?"

"Just enough to—just enough to get to Nevada."

"Can I have it?"

He said, "Sure." He was holding the wheel and looking out into the night.

"And we'll be a gang?"

"Right," he said.

"I like the idea. Belle Starr and her gang."

Mcrae started talking about what the gang could do, making it up as he went along, trying to sound like all the gangster movies he'd seen. He heard himself talking about things like robbery and getaway and staying out of prison, and then, as she sat there staring at him, he started talking about being at Leavenworth, what it was like.

He went on about it, the hours of forced work, and the time alone—the harsh day-to-day routines, the bad food. Before he was through, feeling the necessity of deepening her sense of him as her new accomplice—and feeling strangely as though in some way he had indeed become exactly that—he was telling her everything, all the bad times he'd had, his father's alcoholism, and growing up wanting to hit something for the anger that was in him, the years

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of getting into trouble, the fighting and the kicking and what it had got him. He embellished it all, made it sound worse than it really was because she seemed to be going for it, and because, telling it to her, he felt oddly sorry for himself—a version of this story of pain and neglect and lonely rage was true. He had been through a lot. And as he finished, describing for her the scene at the hospital the last time he saw his father, he was almost certain that he had struck a chord in her. He thought he saw it in the rapt expression on her face.

"Anyway," he said, and smiled at her.

"Mcrae?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"Can you pull over?"

"Well," he said, his voice shaking, "why don't we wait until it runs out of gas?"

She was silent.

"We'll be that much farther down the road," he said.

"I don't really want a gang," she said. "I don't like dealing with other people that much. I mean, I don't think I'm a leader."

"Oh, yes," Mcrae said. "No--you're a leader. You're definitely a leader. I was in the Air Force and I know leaders, and you are definitely what I'd call a leader."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. You are leadership material all the way."

"I wouldn't have thought so."

"Definitely," he said. "Definitely a leader."

"But I don't really like people around, you know."

"That's a leadership quality. Not wanting people around. It is definitely a leadership quality."

"Boy," she said, "the things you learn."

He waited. If he could only think himself through to the way out. If he could get her to trust him, get the car stopped—be there when she turned her back.

"You want to be in my gang, huh?"

"I sure do," he said.

"Well, I guess I'll have to think about it."

"I'm surprised nobody's mentioned it to you before."

"You're just saying that."

"No, really."

"Were you ever married?" she asked.

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"Married?" he said, and then stammered over the answer. "Ah—uh, no."

"You ever been in a gang before?"

"A couple times, but—but they never had good leadership."

"You're giving me a line, huh?"

"No," he said, "it's true. No good leadership. It was always a problem."

"I'm tired," she said, shifting toward him a little. "I'm tired of talking."

The steering wheel was hurting the insides of his hands. He held tight, looking at the coming-on of the white stripes in the road. There were no other cars now, and not a glimmer of light anywhere beyond the headlights.

"Don't you ever get tired of talking sometimes?"

"I never was much of a talker," he said.

"I guess I don't mind talking as much as I mind listening," she said.

He made a sound in his throat that he hoped she took for agreement.

"That's just when I'm tired, though."

"Why don't you take a nap?" he said.

She leaned back against the door and regarded him. "There's plenty of time for that later."

"So," he wanted to say, "you're not going to kill me—we're a gang?"

They had gone for a long time without speaking, a nerve-wrecking hour of minutes during which the gas gauge had sunk to just above empty—and finally she had begun talking about herself, mostly in the third person. It was hard to make sense of most of it, yet he listened as if to instructions concerning how to extricate himself. She talked about growing up in Florida, in the country, and owning a horse. She remembered when she was taught to swim by somebody she called Bill, as if Mcrae would know who that was, and then she told him how when her father ran away with her mother's sister her mother started having men friends over all the time. "There was a lot of obscene goings-on," she said, and her voice tightened a little.

"Some people don't care what happens to their kids," said Mcrae.

"Isn't it the truth?" she said. Then she took the pistol out of the shawl. "Take this exit."

He pulled onto the ramp and up an incline to a two-lane road that went off through the desert, toward a glow that burned on the ho-

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rizon. For perhaps five miles the road was straight as a plumb line and then it curved into long, low undulations of sand and mesquite and cactus.

"My mother's men friends used to do whatever they wanted to me," she said. "It went on all the time. All sorts of obscene goings-on."

Mcrae said, "I'm sorry that happened to you, Belle." And for an instant he was surprised by the sincerity of his feeling—it was as if he couldn't feel sorry enough. Yet it was genuine: it all had to do with his own unhappy story. The whole world seemed very, very sad to him. "I'm really very sorry," he said.

She was quiet a moment, as if thinking about this. Then she said, "Let's pull over now. I'm tired of riding."

"It's almost out of gas," he said.

"I know, but pull it over anyway."

"You sure you want to do that?"

"See?" she said. "That's what I mean. I wouldn't like being told what I should do all the time, or asked if I was sure of what I wanted or not."

He pulled the car over and slowed to a stop. "You're right," he said. "See? Leadership. I'm just not used to somebody with leadership qualities."

She took the gun out and held it a little toward him. He was looking at the perfect dark little circle of the end of the barrel. "I guess we should get out, huh?" she said.

"I guess so," he said. He hadn't even heard himself.

"Do you have any relatives left anywhere?" she said.

"No."

"Your folks are both dead?"

"Right, yes."

"Which one died first?"

"I told you," he said, "didn't I? My mother—my mother died first."

"Do you feel like an orphan?"

He sighed. "Sometimes." The whole thing was slipping away from him.

"I guess I do, too." She reached back and opened her door. "Let's get out now." And when he opened his door she aimed the gun at his head. "Get out slow."

"Aw, Jesus," he said, "look, you're not going to do this, are you? I mean I thought we were friends and all."

"Just get out real slow, like I said to."

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"Okay," he said, "I'm getting out." He opened his door, and the ceiling light surprised and frightened him. Some wordless part of himself understood that this was it, and all his talk had come to nothing. All the questions she had asked him and everything he had told her—it was all completely useless. This was going to happen to him, and it wouldn't mean anything. It would just be what happened.

"Real slow," she said. "Come on."

"Why are you doing this?" he said. "You've got to tell me that before you do it."

"Will you please get out of the car now?"

He just stared at her.

"All right, I'll shoot you where you sit."

"Okay," he said, "don't shoot."

She said, in an irritable voice, as though she were talking to a recalcitrant child, "You're just putting it off."

He was backing himself out, keeping his eyes on the little barrel of the gun, and he could hear something coming, seemed to notice it in the same instant that she said, "Wait." He stood half in and half out of the car, doing as she said, and a truck came over the hill ahead of them, a tractor trailer, all white light and roaring.

"Stay still," she said, crouching, aiming the gun at him.

The truck came fast, was only fifty yards away, and without having to decide about it, without even knowing that he would do it, Mcrae bolted into the road.

He was running—there was the exhausted sound of his own breath, the truck horn blaring, coming on louder, the thing bearing down on him, something buzzing past his head. Time slowed. His legs faltered under him, were heavy, all the nerves gone out of them. In the light of the oncoming truck, he saw his own white hands outstretched as if to grasp something in the air before him, and then the truck was past him, the blast of air from it propelling him over the side of the road and down an embankment in high, dry grass, which pricked his skin and crackled like hay.

He was alive. He lay very still. Above him was the long shape of the road, curving off in the distance, the light of the truck going on. The noise faded and was nothing. A little wind stirred. He heard the car door close. Carefully, he got to all fours and crawled a few yards away from where he had fallen. He couldn't be sure of which direction—he only knew he couldn't stay where he was. Then he

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heard what he thought were her footsteps in the road and he froze. He lay on his side, facing the embankment. When she appeared there, he almost cried out.

"Mcrae?" she said. "Did I get you?" Her eyes went over where he was, and he stopped breathing. "Mcrae?"

He watched her move along the edge of the embankment.

"Mcrae?" She put one hand over her eyes and stared at a place a few feet over from him, then she turned and went back out of sight. He heard the car door again, and again he began to crawl farther away. The ground was cold and rough and there was a lot of sand.

He heard her put the key in the trunk, and he stood up, began to run, he was getting away, but something went wrong in his leg, something sent him sprawling, and a sound came out of him that seemed to echo, to stay on the air, as if to call her to him. He tried to be perfectly still, tried not to breathe, hearing now the small pop of the gun. He counted the reports—one, two, three. She was just standing there at the edge of the road, firing into the dark toward where she must have thought she heard the sound. Then she was rattling the paper bag, reloading. He could hear the click of the gun. He tried to get up and couldn't. He had sprained his ankle, had done something very bad to it. Now he was crawling wildly, blindly, through the tall grass, hearing again the small report of the pistol. At last he rolled into a shallow gully and lay there with his face down, breathing the dust, his own voice leaving him in a whimpering animal-like sound that he couldn't stop, even as he held both shaking hands over his mouth.

"Mcrae?" She sounded so close. "Hey," she said. "Mcrae?"

He didn't move. He lay there perfectly still, trying to stop himself from crying. He was sorry for everything he had ever done. He didn't care about the money, or the car or going out West or anything. When he lifted his head to peer over the lip of the gully, and saw that she had started down the embankment with his flashlight, he lost his sense of himself as Mcrae: he was just something crippled and breathing in the dark, lying flat in a little winding gully of weeds and sand. Mcrae was gone, was someone far, far away, from ages ago—a man fresh out of prison, with the whole country to wander in, and insurance money in his pocket, who had headed West with the idea that maybe his luck, at long last, had changed.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Whenever a courtroom novel becomes a major bestseller, as Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent* did in 1987 and Robert Traver's *Anatomy of a Murder* in 1958, there is a benefit for legal-fiction buffs beyond the merits of the blockbuster at hand. Subsequent publishing seasons are likely to see a plethora of Big Trial books, and while they won't all be gems, some of them will. Excellent books like Al Dewlen's *Twilight of Honor* (1961) and William Harrington's *Which the Justice, Which the Thief* (1963) followed in the wake of Traver's masterpiece. The post-Turow years can be expected to bring forth some comparable highlights, presumably some from Turow himself.

Below are three recent examples of legal detective fiction, the first two in the Perry Mason lawyer-sleuth mode (one already a series and the second surely intended to be) and the third an entry in the Big Trial blockbuster stakes.

*** Michael Nava: *How Town*, Harper and Row, $16.95. Los Angeles lawyer Henry Rios returns in his third case, the first from a mainstream publisher. Rios goes to his hometown of Los Robles to defend Paul Windsor, an admitted pedophile accused of the murder of a porn dealer. The plot is well woven and the trial action effectively done, but character and theme are the novel's strongest suits, as Rios, a thoroughly decent gay man, confronts his unsavory client's charge that to society at large both are contemptible perverts.

*** Paul Levine: *To Speak for the Dead*, Bantam, $17.95. This first novel, introducing Miami trial lawyer Jake Lassiter, is a dazzler, extremely well written and featuring so many quotable passages, usually about law and lawyers or the sharply observed Florida background, you'll want someone handy to read them aloud to. The puzzle plot is enjoyably tricky, the cast of characters colorful, the sometimes comic trial scenes sharp, and the dramatic ending unusual and surprising. That all of the above are sometimes unbelievable can be forgiven, along with a mid-story lag between trials and some frankly corny stock incidents. Levine gives you everything but the kitchen sink in this one, but it adds up to a notable debut.

** Philip Friedman: *Reasonable Doubt*, Donald Fine, $19.95. New York attorney Michael Ryan defends his daughter-in-law, who is accused of the murder of his son. This is a legal soap opera, with its very effective and realistic trial scenes interrupted by TV-ish melodramatic outbursts that seem very phony. Like *Presumed Innocent*, this is a genuine detective story as well as a courtroom book, but unlike Turow's book the thin puzzle seems dwarfed by the near-500-

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page length. Don't get me wrong: trial buffs won't stop reading.

*** Margaret Maron: *Corpus Christmas,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $12.95. In her sixth case, New York homicide lieutenant Sigrid Harald investigates yuletide murder at the Erich Breul House, a private museum where her artist-lover Oscar Nauman is planning to have a retrospective show. Strongest on characterization and atmosphere, this impressive novel is less a police procedural than a traditional closed-circle whodunit, as its nomination for the Malice Domestic mystery convention's Agatha award would suggest.

*** Nicolas Freeling: *Sand Castles,* Mysterious, $17.95. In a 1972 novel, *A Long Silence* (U.S. title *Aupres de ma Blonde*), Freeling precipitously and definitively killed off his famous policeman Piet Van der Valk. Readers who were never able to warm up to the Dutch detective's successor, French sleuth Henri Castang, will be pleased to see Van der Valk back, albeit not resurrected but in a case that preceded his death—thus, in Sherlockian terms, this is his *Hound of the Baskervilles* rather than his "Adventure of the Empty House." Van der Valk and wife Arlette are on a holiday that is constantly interrupted by mysterious and criminous doings. Freeling's quirky, distinctive style and self-conscious literary references (many to his literary father, Simenon) are admittedly not for everybody, but the character insights and social observations of this novel may even win over his usual detractors.

Though Harlan Ellison was a regular contributor to various mystery digests (not *EQMM*) in the middle to late Fifties, in recent years he has been associated more with the science-fiction and fantasy fields. He makes occasional returns to the crime/suspense genre, however, usually just long enough to pick up an Edgar award for best short story. His first Edgar went to "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs," chosen best of 1973 and reprinted in the powerful 1975 collection *Deathbird Stories* (Collier Macmillan, $4.95). The second came fourteen years later for the 1987 tale "Soft Monkey," which becomes the main attraction of a new audio anthology.

Best Mystery Stories of the Year ($19.95), edited by Josh Pachter and Martin H. Greenberg, is an unusual audio book in that it does not have a print counterpart. Ten stories are included on four cassettes, for a total reading time of about six hours. Ellison introduces and reads his own story, and it will surprise no one who has ever heard him speak that his delivery of his own work is as energetic and effective as any professional actor could possibly manage. In fact, he puts the readers of the other stories, who range from fair to good, very much in the shade. Among the other tales included, each with a brief introduction, are Brian Garfield's excellent "King's X," Robert Barnard's droll "The Oxford Way of Death," and tales by authors as well known as Edward Gorman, Loren D. Estleman, Brendan DuBois, William Campbell Gault,

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and Joseph Hansen. The same firm offers another anthology specifically compiled for audio, *Favorite American Detectives* ($19.95), edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Rosalind M. Greenberg. The all-star cast of contributors includes Lawrence Block, Edward D. Hoch, Estleman, Isaac Asimov, Ellery Queen, Stuart M. Kaminsky, Bill Pronzini, and Stuart Palmer. For information, write Dercum Audio, Inc., P.O. Box 1425, West Chester, PA 19380.

Aside from short-story collections, most audio books, certainly those sold in bookstores, are abridgments. While some big novels, padded to begin with, undoubtedly benefit from being compressed into three hours of reading time, for a really good book only the full experience will do. Because of the price tag necessary for six to ten hours' worth of cassettes, specialists in unabridged readings usually target the library market rather than individual buyers. Unabridged readings are also somewhat less likely to have author or celebrity readers, but two recent British imports are exceptions.

Simon Brett's latest Charles Paris book, *A Series of Murders*, is about average for the series and very enjoyable on the page. Brett's own reading, like Ellison's as good or better than any hired voice could manage, makes it even more enjoyable. The variety of vocal characterizations is impressive and the delivery both of the wicked satire and the more serious passages is deft. The five-hour-and-twenty-minute reading would bear more than one listening and thus may be worth the $39.95 cost to at least some individual Brett fans. Colin Dexter's reading of his 1981 Chief Inspector Morse novel, *The Dead of Jericho* ($44.95), is not as impressive as Brett's, but his pleasant, scholarly voice is well suited to the material and should carry the reader over the long seven-hour haul. Check you local library or contact G. K. Hall (70 Lincoln Street, Boston, MA 02111; 1-800-343-2806).

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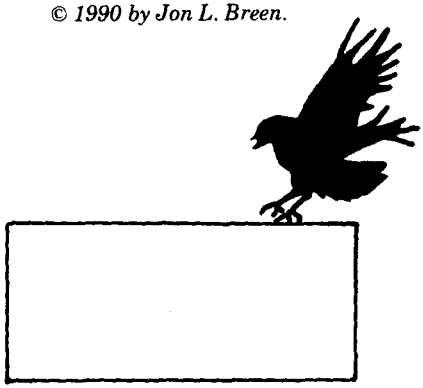

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

"When is Santa Claus coming with his bag of presents for us?" Sonny couldn't resist asking his mother.

"Good Lord, when indeed! Now, where could Santa be, do you suppose?"

Dead as a doornail in the testing room, Sonny should have responded, but instead he said, "Shucks, Mom, it beats me."

Early for Christmas to be sure, but we have a cornucopia of Christmas stories awaiting you at year's end and George Baxt knows no season . . .

I SAW MOMMY KILLING SANTA CLAUS

by GEORGE BAXT

We buried my mother yesterday, so I feel free to tell the truth. She lived to be ninety-three because, like the sainted, loyal son I chose to be, I didn't blab to the cops. I'm Oscar Leigh and my mother was Desiree Leigh. That's right—Desiree Leigh, inventor of the Desiree face cream that promised eternal youth to the young and rejuvenation to the aged. It was one of the great con games in the cosmetics industry. I suppose once this is published, it'll be the end of the Desiree cosmetics empire, but frankly, my dears, I don't give a damn. Desiree Cosmetics was bought by a Japanese combine four years ago, and my share (more than two billion) is safely salted away. I suppose I inherit Mom's billions, too, but what in heaven's name will I do with it all? Count it, I guess.

Desiree Leigh wasn't her real name. She was born Daisy Ray Letch, and who could go through life with a surname like Letch?

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For the past fourteen years she's been entertaining Alzheimer's and that was when I began to take an interest in her past. She was always very mysterious about her origins and equally arcane about the identity of my father. She said he was killed in North Africa back in nineteen forty-three and that his name was Clarence Kolb. I spent a lot of money tracing Clarence, until one night, in bed watching an old movie, the closing credits rolled and one of the character actors was named Clarence Kolb. I mentioned this to Mother the next morning at breakfast, but she said it was a coincidence and she and my father used to laugh about it.

She had no photos of my father, which I thought was strange. When they married a few months before the war, they settled in Brooklyn, in Coney Island. Surely they must have had their picture taken in one of the Coney Island fun galleries? But no, insisted Mother, they avoided the boardwalk and the amusement parks—they were too poor for such frivolities. How did Father make his living? He was a milkman, she said—his route was in Sheepshead Bay. She said he worked for the Borden Company. Well, let me tell you this: there is no record of a Clarence Kolb ever having been employed by the Borden Milk Company. It cost an ugly penny tracking that down.

Did Mom work, too, perhaps? "Oh, yes," she told me one night in Cannes where our yacht was berthed for a few days, "I worked right up until the day before you were born."

"What did you do?" We were on deck playing honeymoon bridge in the blazing sunlight so Mom could keep an eye on the first mate, with whom she was either having an affair or planning to have one.

"I worked in a laboratory." She said it so matter-of-factly while collecting a trick she shouldn't have collected that I didn't believe her. "You don't believe me." (She not only conned, stole, and lied, she was a mind-reader.)

"Sure I believe you." I sounded as convincing as an East Berlin commissar assuring would-be emigrés they'd have their visas to freedom before sundown.*

"It was a privately owned laboratory," she said, sneaking a look at the first mate, who was sneaking a look at the second mate. "It was a couple of blocks from our apartment."

"What kind of a laboratory was it?" I asked, mindful that the second mate was sneaking a look at me.

**Ed. note: A joyful-to-note anachronism—shortly after this story was written.*

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"It was owned by a man named Desmond Tester. He fooled around with all kinds of formulas."

"Some sort of mad scientist?"

She chuckled as she cheated another trick in her favor. "I guess he *was* kind of mad in a way. He had a very brilliant mind. I learned a great deal from him."

"Is that where you originated the Desiree creams and lotions?"

"The seed was planted there."

"How long were you with this—"

"Desmond Tester. Let me see now. Your daddy went into the Army in February of 'forty-two. I didn't know I was pregnant then or he'd never have gone. On the other hand, I suppose if I *had* known, I would have kept it to myself so your dad could go and prove he was a hero and not just a common everyday milkman."

"I don't see anything wrong in delivering milk."

"There's nothing heroic about it, either. Where was I?"

"Taking my king of hearts, which you shouldn't be."

She ignored me and favored the first mate with a seductive smile, and I blushed when the second mate winked at me. "Anyway, I took time off to give birth to you and then I went right back to work for Professor Tester. A nice lady in the neighborhood looked after you. Let me think, what was her name? Oh, yes—Blanche Yurka."

"Isn't that the name of the actress who played Ma Barker in a gangster movie we saw on the late show?"

"I don't know, isn't it? That's my ten of clubs you're taking," she said sharply.

"I've captured it fair and square with the queen of clubs," I told her. "How come you never married again?"

"I guess I was too busy being a career woman. I was assisting Professor Tester in marketing some of his creams and lotions by then. I had such a hard time cracking the department stores."

"When did you come up with your own formulas?"

"That was after the professor met with his unfortunate death."

Unfortunate, indeed. I saw her kill him.

It was Christmas of 1950—in fact, it was Christmas Day. Mom was preparing to roast a turkey at the professor's house—our apartment was much too small for entertaining—and I remember almost everyone who was there. It was mostly kids from the neighborhood, the unfortunate ones whose families couldn't afford a proper Christmas dinner. There must have been about ten of them. Mother and

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the professor were the only adults, although Mom still insists there was a woman there named Laurette with whom the professor was having an affair. Mom says this woman was jealous of her because she thought Mom and the professor were having a little dingdong of their own. (I've always suspected my mother of doing quite a bit of dinging and donging in the neighborhood when she couldn't meet a grocery bill or a butcher bill or satisfy the landlord or Mr. Kumbog, who owned the liquor store.)

Mom says it was Laurette who shot the professor in the heart and ran away (and was never heard of again, need I tell you?)—but I'm getting ahead of myself. It happened like this: Mom was in the kitchen stuffing the turkey when Professor Tester appeared in the doorway dressed in the Santa Claus suit. He had stuffed his stomach but still looked no more like Santa Claus than Monty Woolley did in *Life Begins at Eight-Thirty.*

"Daisy Ray, I have to talk to you," he said.

"Just let me finish stuffing this turkey and get it in the oven," she told him. "I'd like to feed the kids by around five o'clock when I'm sure they'll be tired of playing Post Office and Spin the Bottle and Doctor." I remember her asking me, "Sonny, have you been playing Doctor?"

"As often as I can," I replied with a smirk. And I still do. Now I'm a specialist.

"Daisy Ray, come with me to the laboratory," Tester insisted.

"Oh, really, Desmond," Mother said, "I don't understand your tone of voice."

"There are a lot of things going on around here that are hard to understand," the professor said ominously. "Daisy Ray!" He sounded uncannily like Captain Bligh summoning Mr. Christian.

I caught a very strange and very scary look on my mother's face. And then she did something I now realize should have made the professor realize that something unexpected and undesirable was about to befall him. She picked up her handbag, which was hanging by its strap on the back of a chair, and followed him out of the room. "Sonny, you stay here." Her voice sounded as though it was coming from that echo chamber I heard on the spooky radio show, *The Witch's Tale.*

"Yes, Mama."

I watched her follow Professor Tester out of the kitchen. I was frightened. I was terribly frightened. I had a premonition that some-

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thing awful was going to happen, so I disobeyed her orders and tiptoed after them.

The laboratory was in the basement. I waited in the hall until I heard them reach the bottom of the stairs and head for the main testing room, then I tiptoed downstairs, praying the stairs wouldn't squeak and betray me. But I had nothing to worry about. They were having a shouting match that would have drowned out the exploding of an atom bomb.

The door to the testing room was slightly ajar and I could hear everything.

"What have you done with the formula?" he raged.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Mama was quite cool, subtly underplaying him. It was one of those rare occasions when I almost admired her.

"You damn well know what I'm talking about, you thief!"

"How dare you!" What a display of indignation—had she heard it, Norma Shearer would have died of envy.

"You stole the formula for my rejuvenating cream! You've formed a partnership with the Sibonay Group in Mexico!"

"You're hallucinating. You've been taking too many of your own drugs."

"I've got a friend at Sibonay—he's told me everything! I'm going to put you behind bars unless you give me back my formula!"

Although I didn't doubt for one moment that my mother had betrayed him, I still had to put my hand over my mouth to stifle a laugh. I mean, have you ever seen Santa Claus blowing his top? It's a scream in red and white.

"Don't you touch me! Don't you lay a hand on me!" Mother's handbag was open and she was fumbling for something in it. He slapped her hard across the face. Then I heard the *pop* and the professor was clutching at his chest. Through his fingers little streams of blood began to form. Mom was holding a tiny pearl-handled pistol in her hand, the kind Kay Francis used to carry around in a beaded bag. My God, I remember saying to myself, I just saw Mommy killing Santa Claus.

I turned tail and ran. I bolted up the stairs and into the front of the house, where the other kids who couldn't possibly have heard what had gone on in the basement were busy choosing up sides for a game called Kill the Hostess. I joined in and there wasn't a peep out of Mom for at least half an hour.

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I began to wonder if maybe I had been hallucinating, if maybe I hadn't seen Mom slay the professor, and I left the other kids and—out of curiosity and I suppose a little anxiety—went to the kitchen.

You've got to hand it to Mom (you might as well, she'd take it anyway): the turkey was in the oven, roasting away. She had prepared the salad. Vegetables were simmering, timed to be ready when the turkey was finished roasting. She was topping a sweet-potato pie with little round marshmallows. She looked up when I came in and asked, "Enjoying yourself, Sonny?"

I couldn't resist asking her. "When is Santa Claus coming with his bag of presents for us?"

"Good Lord, when indeed! Now, where could Santa be, do you suppose?"

Dead as a doornail in the testing room, I should have responded, but instead I said, "Shucks, Mom, it beats me."

She thought for a moment and then said brightly, "I'll bet he's downstairs working on a new formula. Go down and tell him it's time he put in his appearance."

Can you top that? Sending her son into the basement to discover the body of the man she'd just assassinated?

Well, I dutifully discovered the body and started yelling my head off, deciding that was the wisest course under the circumstances. Mom and the kids came running. When they saw the body, the kids began shrieking, me shrieking the loudest so that maybe Mom would be proud of me, and Mom hurried and phoned the police.

What ensued after the police arrived was sheer genius on my mother's part. I don't remember the detective's name—by now he must be in that Big Squadroom in the Sky—but I'm sure if he was ever given an I.Q. test he must have ended up owing them about fifty points. Mom was saying hysterically, "Oh, my God, to think there was a murderer in the house while I was in the kitchen preparing our Christmas dinner and the children were in the parlor playing guessing games!" She carried the monologue for about ten minutes until the medical examiner came into the kitchen to tell the detective the professor had been done in by a bullet to the heart.

"Any sign of the weapon?" asked the detective.

"It's not *my* job to look for one," replied the examiner testily.

So others were dispatched to look for a weapon. Knowing Mom, it wouldn't be in her handbag, but where, I wondered, could she

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have stashed it? I stopped in mid-wonder when I heard her say, "It might have been Laurette."

"Who's she?" asked the detective.

Mom folded her hands, managing to look virtuous and sound scornful. "She was the professor's girl friend, if you know what I mean. He broke it off with her last week and she wasn't about to let him off so easy. She's been phoning and making threats, and this morning he told me she might be coming around to give him his Christmas present." She added darkly, "That Christmas present was called—*death!*"

"Did you see her here today?" the detective asked. Mom said she hadn't. He asked us all if we'd seen a strange lady come into the house. I was tempted to tell him the only strange lady I saw come into the house was my mother, but I thought of that formula and how wealthy we'd become and I became a truly loving son.

"She could have come in by the cellar door," I volunteered. It was the first time I saw my mother look at me with love and admiration. "It's on the other side of the house, and with all the noise we were making—"

"And I had the radio on in the kitchen listening to the *Make Believe Ballroom*," was the fuel Mother added to the fire I had ignited. The arson was successful. The police finally left—without finding the weapon—taking the body with them, and Mom proceeded with Christmas dinner as though killing a man was an everyday occurrence.

The dinner was delicious, although some of us kids noted the turkey had a slightly strange taste to it.

"Turkey can be gamy," Mama trilled—and within the next six months she was on her way to becoming one of the most powerful names in the cosmetics industry.

I remained a bachelor. I worked alongside Mother and her associates and watched as, one by one over the years, she got rid of all of them. She destroyed the Sibonay people in Mexico by proving, falsely and at great cost, that they were the front for a dope-running operation. She thought it would be fun if I could become mayor of New York City, but a psychic told me to forget about it and go into junk bonds—which I did and suffered staggering losses. (The psychic died a mysterious death, which she obviously hadn't foretold herself.)

Year after year, Christmas after Christmas, I was sorely tempted to tell Mama I saw her kill Santa Claus. And year after year, Christ-

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mas after Christmas, I was aching to know where she had hidden the weapon.

And then I found out. It was Christmas Day fourteen years ago.

The doctors, after numerous tests, had assured me that Mom was showing signs of Alzheimer's. Such as when applying lipstick, she ended up covering her chin with rouge. And wearing three dresses at the same time. And filing her shoes and accessories in the deep freeze. It was sad, really, even for a murderess who deserved no mercy. Yet she insisted on cooking the Christmas dinner herself that year.

"It's going to be just like that Christmas Day when we had that wonderful dinner with the neighborhood kiddies," she said. "And Professor Tester dressed up as Santa Claus and brought in that big bag of games and toys. And he gave me the wonderful gift of the exclusive rights to the formula for the Desiree Rejuvenating Lotion."

There were twenty for dinner and, believe it or not, Mother cooked it impeccably. The servants were a bit nervous, but the guests were too drunk to notice. Then, while eating the turkey, Mother asked me across the table, "Does the turkey taste the same way it did way back when, Sonny?"

And then I remembered how the turkey had tasted that day twenty-six years before when Mama had said something about turkey sometimes tasting gamy. I looked at her and, ill or not, there was mockery in her eyes. It was then that I said to her, not knowing if she would understand what I meant: "Mama, I saw what you did."

There was a small smile on her face. Slowly her head began to bob up and down. "I had a feeling you did," she said. "But you haven't answered me. Does the turkey taste the same way it did then?"

I spoke the truth. "No, Mama, it doesn't. It's very good."

She was laughing like a madwoman. Everyone at the table looked embarrassed and there was nowhere for me to hide. "Is this a private joke between you and your mother?" the man at my right asked me. But I couldn't answer. Because my mother had reached across the table and shoved her hand into the turkey's cavity, obscenely pulling out gobs of stuffing and flinging it at me.

"Don't you know why the turkey tasted strange? Can't you guess why, Sonny? Can't you guess what I hid in the stuffing so those damn fool cops wouldn't find it? Can't you guess, Sonny? Can't you?"

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DETECTIVERSE

DEAD GIVEAWAY

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

Clive Zehd was found dead with a hole in his head,
Face down on the living-room floor.
Wife Dawn with a yawn said, "I'm not sad he's gone—
He was such an insufferable bore."

Fred Clyde, Homicide, with departmental pride,
Vowed he would unravel the case.
"It's sound, I have found, if one just snoops around—
There are clues all over this place.
The time of the crime is important and I'm
Extremely precise, I'll tell you.
Now Clive, still alive about one forty-five,
Was killed at a quarter of two."

"My three friends and me were having iced tea
By the pool when my husband was slain,
And none had a gun when the foul deed was done—
Will the blood leave a permanent stain?"

"It's true all of you were in each other's view,"
Clyde said in his manner outspoken.
"The gun? There was none outside in the sun
Or in here where the window is broken.
My dear, I do fear it's now perfectly clear
Zehd must have been hit from afar.
My guess, I confess, is *I* caused your distress
By shooting at crooks from my car.
Afield I did wield, while wearing my shield,
A gun, I am sorry to say.
I shot quite a lot and it seems that I got
Poor Zehd, who was struck by a stray."

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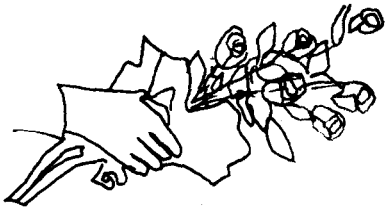
"No strife," smiled the wife. "You should know that his life
Was insured very well—thank to Clive,
I'm set free of debt, so please don't be upset,
For he's worth much more dead than alive."



THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS

by LUCILLE SCHULBERG WARNER

He liked to do the two-step,
He liked to tap his feet,
He liked to waltz and tango
And soft-shoe to the beat.
But when they finally caught him,
Jimmy didn't take a chance—
Since he had to face the music,
He chose to sing, not dance.

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a *NEW* short story by

H. H. MORRIS

Ned Root wasn't the first father who couldn't describe a missing daughter. He had no idea what she owned in the way of clothing, so couldn't say if anything wasn't hanging in her closet that should be. One interesting fact came out of the deputy's questions. She had banked every cent she'd ever earned in her own name. She purchased her own clothes. Otherwise, she had no expenses . . .

SQUARE ROOT

by H. H. MORRIS

Ned Root opened the front door of his small frame house before I could knock. Early morning's gentle rain had turned into what the farmers call a frog strangler, and if Root's porch roof had leaked any more he could have opened a municipal swimming pool under it. I was glad he'd been watching for my arrival.

"Come in, Deputy," he said. "Get that jacket off and grab a cup of fresh coffee."

I followed him through the living room and into the kitchen. We sat at the small table after he hung up my wet jacket and hat and poured two cups of passable coffee from a percolator that must have been fifteen years old. Its metal gleamed. So did the stove and refrigerator. Either Root or his daughter held to the old belief that cleanliness is next to godliness.

"What did the woman I talked to tell you, Deputy?" Root asked.

"That your daughter Naomi is missing. I'm here to get the details."

"There aren't any details."

I said, "Sure there are, Reverend, you just didn't notice them—or, more likely, you noticed and didn't understand that they're details. So let me ask you some questions."

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There's a form we use for missing persons, but I didn't have one in the cruiser. I took out my notebook and a county ballpoint—if our guns misfired as often as those pens do, all of us deputies would have been dead long ago—and started asking the questions from memory. I'd had plenty of practice. There's not a lot of future in some parts of the county, so teens often take off.

"When did Naomi disappear?"

"I'm not sure," he said.

"When did you see her last?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Thursday A.M.," I said, writing. "What was she doing?"

"Heading for school."

"You were supposed to see her after school?"

Root said, "We were to meet here no later than one-thirty yesterday afternoon. We have a revival—single services Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, both services Sunday—in Sapulpa. That's just a little beyond Tulsa."

"You didn't meet?"

"No. Naomi's a good girl, Deputy, but she's only sixteen. And while the school cooperates with me, certain teachers won't excuse her absences on The Lord's Business. I waited until almost two, then headed out. I drove back after the service last night. She wasn't here. I assumed she'd come home, realized I'd followed my call, and stayed with a girl friend. When she didn't come home this morning before school, I called the school office. Naomi was absent. That was when I called your office."

Root was an ordained Baptist evangelist who belonged to the local congregation, although he seldom attended. He was an independent clergyman who went into a church for a weekend, a week, or a fortnight to lead a revival meeting. His was a dying breed, gradually going out of business because even rural areas have cable TV and preaching is as close as whatever station carries one of the syndicated boys. I looked around the modest, clean kitchen once again and contrasted it with the luxury some TV preachers live in. Root was my idea of an honorable man.

A good evangelist has a gimmick. Root's was Naomi, the daughter who could sing like an angel from the time she was four. He showed me the scrapbook. I didn't need it. I'd heard that child sing at school Christmas programs. She could bring tears to the audience with "O, Holy Night." I could imagine how many sinners she lured down the aisle when she sang "Have Thine Own Way" or "Softly and

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Tenderly." None of the new, soft rock sound for Naomi—she sang the old-time favorites, just as her daddy preached the old-time religion. Root was missing more than a daughter. He'd lost his best asset.

"You thought she stayed with a friend. Name one. Name several," I suggested.

"Only one. Jewel Wing."

"I know the family."

"Good Baptists," he told me.

"So describe Naomi."

"Short and blonde."

Root wasn't the first father who couldn't describe a missing daughter. He had no idea what she owned in the way of clothing, so couldn't tell me if anything wasn't hanging in her closet that should be. One interesting fact came out of my questions. She had banked every cent she'd ever earned in her own name. She purchased her own clothes. Otherwise, she had no expenses.

"Maybe it's my fault for changing her name," he said as I started to leave.

"What's wrong with Naomi? Isn't it biblical?"

"The first chapter of Ruth. Naomi Mara. 'And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.' Her mother suddenly lost blood and died three days after she was born. It was to be Naomi Mary. I changed the last letter of the middle name in a moment of bitterness. I've never blamed Naomi for her mother's death, but perhaps the child got the idea I did from her own study of Holy Scripture.

"She's a bright girl, Deputy, but without worldly experience."

The high school hadn't changed much since I graduated over twenty years before. The custodian had just added about six more coats of green paint to the plaster in the halls. The principal, Ned Black, was expecting me.

"Naomi Root is a barely adequate student because she misses far too many classes," he told me. "Here's her cumulative record."

A cumulative record is like a series of poker hands. Some entries are winners, some losers. The facts such as grades and attendance records are useful. The opinions of the teachers are only as creditable as the people writing them. A few of them had concentrated on Naomi's peculiar situation as the daughter of a widower who took her on the road with him. Their prejudices were obvious.

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Naomi had entered school in the fourth grade under an unusual arrangement. Prior to that time, she'd received a private education from her father. The cumulative record showed grades just sufficient for promotion each year, a pattern of being yanked out of school during the fall and spring to join her father's crusades, and more teachers who felt sorry for a nice, very mature girl than who punished her for her father's beliefs.

"I'd like to start with her fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Bell," I told Ned. "When can I meet with her?"

He went to the PC in one corner and entered some commands. The screen gave us room number and subject for every grade from kindergarten through twelfth for any time of day. I remembered when the school kept all that information on paper.

"Mrs. Bell begins geography in ten minutes. I'll cover for her. You may meet her here, Deputy. I understand that time is critical when a child goes missing."

When I was in the fourth grade, Mrs. Violet Bell had been the faculty beauty, a young woman just beginning her career. In her fifties, she remained a striking woman, as well as a highly respected teacher. I explained the problem to her.

"There were rumors," she said drily. "There are always rumors at lunch—they're more interesting than the cafeteria food. What can I do to assist you?"

"Remember."

I handed her the record to help her recall Naomi. She didn't bother to look at it.

"She was mature," said Mrs. Bell softly. "Physically and, in some respects, emotionally. Very few girls get their periods in the fourth grade, Deputy, so I tend to recall such incidents. Naomi was a child without a mother or other female role models to give her comfort and advice. That meant I had to play a rather significant part in her education in feminine hygiene. I also took it on myself to inform her father. Except for being stunned by her youth—she was only nine—he was quite grateful for my help and later called the school to register a compliment."

"How about his taking her out of school?"

"For me—for all teachers who cooperated, I believe—he made her keep up with her work while she was singing."

I began to think the faculty could tell me nothing much. Root had moved to the area the year Naomi entered the fourth grade. He'd

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come from somewhere in Arkansas. That meant nothing to Naomi's teachers. All they had to go on was what they saw. And they saw only an intensely private child who communicated well with adults, never caused trouble, got along with most of her classmates, and had finally made one close friend in high school. She was as close to anonymous as an eleventh grader can be in a school with an average of twenty-five students in a grade.

"Is there a private place I can meet Jewel Wing?" I asked the principal.

"You can use my office, Deputy. This is school business. We let Naomi leave early yesterday. She lives ten minutes from the school. I feel responsible."

Jewel Wing was a short brunette, also sixteen, clad in the unofficial uniform of jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt that said something. Hers said Hello on the front and Goodbye on the back.

"You and Naomi are friends," I said as we sat.

"That poor kid."

"Poor?"

Jewel said, "I don't mean money poor. She has a checking account, a money-market account, and three certificates of deposit. I mean poor in love. I mean poor in having never really been a child. Like she sees MTV only when she comes to my place. Like she can wear jeans to school, but all her dressy clothes either make her look like a little girl or a dumpy old frow. She wears only lip gloss. No eye shadow. No base. Her whole life is being Miss Peaches and Cream *and bringing the sinners to Jesus with her voice.*"

"So her hair's straight for a religious reason?"

"You got it, Deputy. Her daddy doesn't believe in beauty parlors, as he calls them. So she got out."

"You gonna tell me the road?"

"No way."

"But it was a boy," I persisted. "More than likely an older guy."

For just a moment the admission was on her face—then she got her features composed. But her brown eyes were wide with fear.

"You're her friend, Jewel," I said. "You probably reckon yourself his friend, too, even though you don't know him very well. But she's only sixteen. One way or another, he could get in a lot of trouble."

Jewel gave me her smart-teen smile and said, "Naomi's eighteen. I've seen her birth certificate."

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"That's mighty interesting, little one. I'm looking at her birth certificate right here. It says she's sixteen."

"Those things can be faked, Deputy."

Normally, we don't put missing teens on the computer for seventy-two hours. This time I did. The local banker was a Baptist deacon, so he talked freely to the law about a respected evangelist's daughter. When I found out she'd withdrawn $700.00 from her checking and money-market accounts, I figured Naomi hadn't strayed far. I was just worried about who she'd strayed with.

A deputy from one county east called me the following Friday.

"Your missing gal is singing in a bluegrass group with her new husband," he told me. "Wanta come listen? That kid has a voice like an angel."

The Kountry Klub was a roadhouse with dim lights, enough smoke in the air to draw an E.P.A. alert, a bartender who kept a baseball bat under the bar, and various denizens of both sexes who could give sin a bad name. Even though I was in a civilian sports jacket, they made me for law several minutes before Conrad, the deputy who'd called me, and a younger deputy about the size of a small silo entered. The way they looked around told me just how far from a revival meeting Naomi had strayed.

"Is that her?" Conrad asked me.

The band was filing onto the small stage. There were two women. The one with the guitar wasn't Naomi—her yellow hair was brassy and her face was a hard odometer that had clocked too many nights in dives like The Kountry Klub. The one without an instrument was close, except that her hair was neatly styled by a professional and her clothes made her look neither a little girl nor a dumpy old frow. Her slacks, tucked into boots, were tight enough to crack a flea on. Her western shirt fit almost as snugly as the slacks.

"It could be," I told Conrad.

They were well into the set—I'd heard better bluegrass in a hundred roadhouses—before she did a solo number. It was soft, a country lament about a cheating man. The band muted their instruments to the best of their abilities and let her voice carry them. The raucous crowd literally froze. Fights got postponed. Newly introduced lovers for a night quit sizing each other up. The clear, pure voice held everyone's full attention. She was still winding the number up when the applause and cheering began.

"That's her voice," I told Conrad.

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The Kountry Klub's owner wasn't happy about loaning us his office after the band's first set, but keeping on the good side of the law took priority over happiness. Since it was Conrad's jurisdiction, he went inside with me. The uniformed silo stood guard at the door. Naomi and the young mandolin player entered.

"Naomi Root?" I asked her.

"It's Naomi Blood now," she said. "This is Bill Blood, my husband."

That explained the band's name—Bill and the Bloodhounds.

"Your daddy doesn't remember giving his consent," I told her.

"I'm legally an adult."

"The school has a birth certificate that says you're younger."

"Here's mine," she said, reaching into her purse. "The marriage license was issued at the county seat. Justice Wheeler performed the ceremony."

She spoke with the assurance of a girl who'd lured a thousand sinners down the aisle. I noticed that the envelope she carried the certificate in was addressed to Naomi Root, c/o Jewel Wing. When I looked at the document closely, I noticed the discrepancies—different town, different day and month of birth, and Mary instead of Mara for her middle name. She was also illegitimate. She wasn't the person the high school had on file.

"It doesn't exactly add up," I said softly.

"A lot of things didn't add up, Deputy," answered Naomi.

"I'm listening."

"I remembered too much about too long ago. I was always way ahead of the other girls physically. It's kind of embarrassing to talk about, but when I was in the fourth grade—"

"Mrs. Bell told me," I interrupted. "Mr. Blood, where and when did you enter the picture?"

"Not far from here, Deputy—about six or seven months ago. Reverend Root was conducting a revival. Somebody told me about this girl I should hear sing. So I went. And I heard her. And before I knew it, I was walking down the aisle to accept Jesus. It was Naomi's voice done it."

"So how does that one night of religion end up with her your wife and singing in a dive that Satan himself might not enter without an armed backup?"

Blood said, "I tried to make it outside of bluegrass, Deputy. But music is all I really know. So I talked to Reverend Root about working with him, doing some picking and testifying and maybe even backing up Naomi, since I can strum a guitar, too. He took me up

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on it, but he sure didn't pay much. I didn't care. I got to hear Naomi sing. And one thing led to another, until the Reverend said he wouldn't be needing me no more."

Naomi said, "It was Daddy's way of taking care of me—and of himself. So Bill and I found ways to meet."

If the two of them weren't deeply in love, they should have gone into acting. The adoring glances they exchanged looked plenty real to me.

"You couldn't wait until you finished school?" I asked Naomi.

"I hate school. Do you know what my nickname there is?"

"No."

"Square Root," she told me, her blue eyes flashing angrily. "I could never listen to popular music at home. I could never dress in style or wear makeup. It was always Naomi, the sweet little singer, the old-time Christian innocent. Besides, if you checked you know I didn't do well in school. I spent too much time on the road."

"So give me an address," I said.

Blood asked, "Then what happens?"

"What won't happen is you two running. You go on the road, you leave an address behind—even if it's just a roadhouse. I need more than I have to split a man and wife, especially when they're on a working honeymoon."

Root was out of town for a ten-day revival up near Kansas City. That gave me plenty of time to call the deputies just over the Arkansas line and ask them to do me a favor. They knew the fastest route through their state's vital-statistics red tape, just like I knew it in my state. By the time Root got back to town and gave me a Monday-morning call to request a progress report, I had the data I needed.

"I didn't find Naomi Mara," I said. "I found her older sister."

"Impossible. She's an only child, Deputy."

"I know. I reckon you'd better come in and talk it over."

Fifteen minutes later an unshaven, obviously shaken Root entered my office. I poured the coffee. Then I set up the tape recorder, asked him to identify himself, and read him his rights.

"Mind telling me what this is all about?" he demanded. "You're treating me like a criminal."

"Suspect," I corrected.

"Suspected of what?"

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"That's what I'm trying to figure out, Reverend. Take a look at these."

I started with the birth certificates. Then I showed him the death certificates, one for his wife, one for Naomi Mara.

"There must be some mistake," he said.

"You made it. Why didn't you just let her go?"

"She's my daughter."

"And legally an adult, free to quit school, free to marry, free not to learn the truth."

"That she's illegitimate? I was trying to hide a youthful mistake. Besides, I married her mother. I got right with The Lord."

I said, "I work for Tarbut County. If that means being on the same side as God, so much the better. Right now, I'm human law. And human law isn't exactly forgiving about what I may have discovered."

"What do you want, Deputy? I don't have much money."

"That's mistake number two."

"You trapped me."

"Not yet. Maybe never. But I'm telling you that you aren't Ned Root."

He said, "I'll go to the sheriff. I'm a respected evangelist. I have my rights."

"Yeah, I just read them to you. Benton County, Arkansas, wants to solve a murder that occurred sixteen years ago last October. Their problem has always been that they didn't have a name for the bones they found. Now if I told them the murdered man was named Ned Root, that one birth certificate for his daughter lists his occupation as none and the other as self-employed handyman, they'd have something to go on. So do you want to be John Doe or give me a name?"

"My name is Ned Root."

"That was the name you took. That was the name you used in Bible college. That's the name on your ordination certificate. You probably have Ned Root's social-security number and use his birthdate. None of that matters. Science has ways of proving you aren't him."

He turned to run. The two deputies he collided with at the office door didn't have authority in Tarbut County, but they had muscles. They also had lots of questions straight from Benton County, the jurisdiction that paid their wages. He fought extradition, but it didn't matter. It's suspicious enough when someone takes a dead man's name, but taking his daughter is even worse . . .

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"Why?" Naomi asked me a few months later.

"Decency, or maybe remorse," I told her. "The man we knew as Ned Root killed your father, probably over your mother. Your younger sister was born prematurely and died in the hospital. He felt responsible for you. There's a part of me that wishes I'd let him stay free."

"But he never loved me. That explains a lot."

"You've found love. His name is Bill Blood."

Blood had the courtesy to stare at the office floor and look like he'd been caught stealing chickens. There was something about that boy that told me he wasn't a stranger to strangers' henhouses.

"Why did he file the missing-persons report on me?" Naomi persisted.

"You were the meal ticket, Naomi. The bogus Ned Root had no great talent for preaching, although I think he was sincere about it. You had your voice. He discovered it when you were six. He was smart enough to say you were four. What difference could two years make? And he never stole your money. Give the man credit. In that respect, he wasn't a thief."

"Naomi is still the meal ticket." Blood looked at her proudly. "A talent scout came to hear Bill and the Bloodhounds. We weren't good enough. But she's going to Nashville. I'm gonna be her manager."

A voice like an angel, a childhood that had been so restricted the other youngsters called her Square Root—I started to warn her away from Nashville. Instead, I asked her a question.

"How did you know to request a birth certificate for Naomi Mary instead of Naomi Mara?"

She and Bill exchanged a glance, then broke into laughter.

"I'm sorry, Deputy. I shouldn't laugh. But you don't understand the revival business from the inside. You sure hit it when you said my father—well, I thought he was my father—couldn't preach with the big boys. Still, he had his strengths. I don't suppose he owned more than twenty sermons total. See, he went into a new town every week or two and could use them over and over. One of his favorites was when he confessed how far away from God he'd been when I was born. He'd launch into the Mary-Mara story. I didn't pay much attention to the sermons, so one night when my mind was wandering and I was wishing I was anywhere else, it hit me. Maybe there were two Naomis."

"So you took a stab at it?"

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"Why not?" she said. "I wrote this pathetic letter to whatever the office is in Little Rock. Bill and Jewel helped me work it out. I was an orphan being raised by distant cousins. They weren't sure how old I was. But they remembered hearing that I'd been born in Benton County. Then I said they thought I was about nineteen. My checking account was Naomi M. Root, so I figured my personal check would help verify the story. It worked. And everything made sense—except that you found out a lot more. I'm going to testify in his defense."

I studied her closely. She was beautiful. Her years of working revivals had given her poise. And she and Bill together were shrewd. Nashville didn't have a chance.

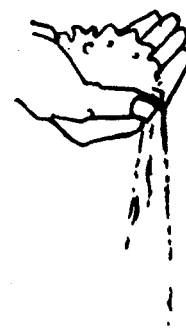
"I'm glad, Naomi," I said softly. "A man has to love a woman a lot to kill over her. He has to love her even more to take her daughter by another man, raise the girl as his own, and give her a financial start in life at his own expense."

"So why did you arrest him?" Naomi asked, tears in her eyes.

"He couldn't let go."

"And I couldn't stay Square Root."

She smiled through her tears. I felt one regret—that I'd never hear that voice again. Then I remembered TNN. If I didn't catch her making her Opry debut, she'd surely be on *Nashville Now*. I was glad she was Naomi Mary instead of Naomi Mara. She had seen enough bitterness in her life.



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ON OUR COVER

Jill Eikenberry, who plays Ann Kelsey in the NBC-TV series *LA Law,* was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and raised in Madison, Wisconsin; St. Joseph, Missouri; and Kansas City, Missouri, attending a different school every year for the first eight years of her education. At age 16, she and her mother returned to Madison where Jill completed high school. After studying anthropology at Barnard College in New York for two years, she was persuaded by a friend to audition for the Yale Drama School and was accepted into the three-year program. In 1970, she left Yale to perform at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., where she met her future husband, Michael Tucker. They were married in June of 1973.

Eikenberry's first love is the stage and she has appeared in productions of *Watch on the Rhine, Onward, Victoria, Uncommon Women, Porch* (by EQMM writer Jeff Sweet), and Lanford Wilson's *Lemon Sky,* for which she was honored with an Obie for best performance in an Off Broadway play. She made her feature-film debut in 1976 in Joan Micklin Silver's *Between the Lines.* Her other motion pictures include *Hide in Plain Sight, Arthur,* and *The Manhattan Project.*

Her on-screen pairing with her husband in a two-part episode of NBC-TV's *Hill Street Blues* was the germ of the idea for *LA Law.*

Michele Green, Abby Perkins in *LA Law,* was born in Las Vegas. Her father died when she was two. Michele's mother moved her and her older brother to Los Angeles. In high school there, she joined the theater club, concentrating mostly on dancing and singing. On graduation, she was recommended to a talent agent and landed a job at her first audition. She joined a four-year conservatory program at USC, supporting herself with occasional television roles, as well as appearing on the stage in such productions as *Electra, The Shadow Box,* and *Once Upon a Mattress.*

After completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, she became a series regular on the short-lived series, *Bay City Blues,* produced by Steven Bochco. After its cancellation, acting jobs became sparse and she went to Mexico for the next year and a half, immersing herself in volunteer work for Amigos de las Americas, a public-health project to improve sanitation in Mexico and Central America. Returning to the States, she was cast in the TV special, *Perry Mason Returns.* Six months later, Steven Bochco offered her her role in *LA Law.*

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first publication in the U.S.

Leila stared hard at the ten brown bottles. Every evening Arnold drank at least one while watching late-night TV. If she poured away a little of the beer in just one of those bottles and replaced it with paraquat— She almost giggled with horror. It would be Russian roulette . . .

TEN BROWN BOTTLES

by MARGRET GERAGHTY

He told her on Sunday, over the peach pie and custard.

"I'm having an affair," he said. "I want a divorce."

Leila stopped chewing and stared at him woodenly. After five frozen seconds, her brain began to tango. All those nights when she thought he'd been working late. All those times when she thought he'd been sickening for something because he hadn't wanted dinner.

Arnold. Her husband. And another woman.

She eyed the remains of the Sunday lunch she had taken such pains to prepare and said bitterly, "I suppose she can cook?"

"Cordon Bleu," he muttered, without looking up.

Leila felt sick. She was pushing forty. Her bust had dropped, her hips had spread, and her stomach was no flatter than a humpbacked bridge. After twenty years of marriage, who'd want her now?

"Well, you can whistle for your divorce," she sobbed, and fled upstairs.

On Monday morning, she awakened angry. She wanted to flatten him like an earwig with the garden spade. When she went out to the garage to empty her trash bin, the complete home arsenal swam before her eyes. A rusty scythe. A dragon-toothed saw. A bevy of chemicals, clustered like penguins on the dusty shelf.

And in the far corner, Arnold's home-brewing equipment. Her eyes lingered on the bottles of beer. There were ten of them, ten brown bottles, neatly labeled. She'd found it amusing once: a social

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snob like Arnold, who drank whiskey in public, making home-brew for private consumption.

Her hand closed upon a phial of paraquat. It was three-quarters empty. She bit her lip. If there wasn't enough, if it didn't work, there would be no second chance, no writing to the manufacturer to make a complaint.

She stared hard at the ten brown bottles. Every evening Arnold drank at least one while watching late-night TV. If she poured away a little of the beer in just one of those bottles and replaced it with paraquat— She almost giggled with horror. It would be Russian roulette.

Five minutes later, Leila walked from the garage, washed her hands in the kitchen, and made herself coffee. She felt calm now, her emotions sealed in a core of ice, along with the warm glow of love that had been hers for over twenty years. She'd be arrested, of course, and charged with murder. She didn't care about that. She didn't care about anything except revenge.

The days passed in a shiver of normality. Every night Arnold came home late and slept like a lodger in the room across the landing. Every morning he arose and went to work. When Leila pulled his shirts from the dirty-linen bag, they smelt of lust and stale perfume.

By Thursday, she felt as jumpy as a grasshopper. On Friday, she could stand it no longer. She raised the garage door and peeped inside.

One brown bottle. There it stood, glinting malevolently in a shaft of light. It was a symbol, thought Leila, a bitter symbol of the sickness in her marriage. Maybe if she snatched it from the shelf, tipped the poison away, everything would be all right.

Instead, she ran indoors and let her tears soak into the cushions on the sitting-room couch.

That evening, as usual, she ate alone: a supermarket pizza in front of the television.

At nine, she climbed the stairs with a mug of cocoa and a couple of sleeping pills.

At seven the following morning, the doorbell rang, piercing her oblivion like the prongs of a pitchfork. Leila sat up, blinking, and reached for her bathrobe.

Arnold's door was closed as she made her way groggily across the hall. At the top of the stairs, she paused, peering through the window

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that overlooked the street. She stopped dead. Parked outside was a big, bright police car.

Leila sucked in her breath. Frowning, she pushed open the door to Arnold's room. The bed stood empty, the coverlet smooth. Downstairs, the bell rang for the third time.

"All right, all right. I'm coming."

Through the patterned glass, she discerned two dark figures standing on the path. When she opened the door, they moved smoothly toward her.

"Mrs. Bailey? Would you mind if we come in?"

They persuaded her to sit. While the policewoman talked, the policeman made tea. Leila could hear him filling the kettle, jangling spoons, opening cupboards.

"An accident?" Leila tried hard to concentrate. She felt confused and dizzy. "You say my husband died in an accident?" Her hands began to shake. She thrust them deep into her pockets. "You mean while he was driving?"

"No." The woman glanced at her colleague. "Honey, do you know where your husband was last night?"

Ah. Leila's heart clanged like an old-fashioned dinner gong. They wanted to know if she knew about the other woman. It might be better, at least for the time being, if she didn't.

"I—uh—I knew Arnold was working late." She took a sip of tea, almost gagging on its sweetness. "He often did."

"Yes." Another glance. Another agonizing pause. Leila felt like screaming.

And then they told her—tactfully, sympathetically, as they had been trained to do. Arnold had spent the previous evening at another woman's house while the woman's gamekeeper husband was out working. After having dinner together, they had gone into the bedroom. The policewoman coughed. "I'm afraid they were still there when the lady's husband returned this morning."

Leila stared dumbly. She had a feeling she had missed something important, but she wasn't sure what.

The policewoman continued. "Well, as I mentioned, the husband is a gamekeeper." She paused. "When he saw them together, he lost control, picked up his shotgun, and pulled the trigger."

Leila almost choked. "He shot them dead?"

"The husband's confessed." The policewoman covered Leila's hand with her own. "It would have been very quick. They never woke up."

"Instantaneous," added the policeman, but Leila wasn't listening.

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Her relief at the knowledge that *she* was not a murderer was so intense that she almost laughed.

After a while, her doctor arrived to give her some tablets. Later she would have to identify Arnold's body, but for the moment she was on her own. She went out to the garage and picked up the last bottle of Arnold's home-brew. She had no need of its lethal contents now. She should pour it away.

But as she stood in the garage with the bottle in her hands, a phrase used by one of the police officers came floating out of her subconscious like an echo in a valley.

She frowned and tried to push the words away. But they resisted.

Something was wrong. She could feel her mind clearing fast, like a beach at high tide. A suspicion began to form. Still holding the bottle, she went indoors, placed it upon the draining board, and stared at it for a good half minute.

Then she unscrewed the top and poured a dribble of frothy liquid into a glass.

Her throat felt as dry as an onion skin. "Bottoms up," she whispered, and raised the glass to her lips.

It tasted okay. Vile, but not toxic. With a shaking hand, she wiped her mouth. Then she went upstairs to run a bath. If her hunch was wrong and the contents were poisonous, she would at least die clean.

Two hours later, she began to feel hungry. She traced a ponderous finger over the bottle on the draining board. If there was nothing wrong with this bottle, then what had happened to the one with the paraquat? Had Arnold already drunk it? Had he taken it to his lover's house and consumed it in front of her?

Leila shook her head. It was inconceivable that Arnold would have cemented a romantic liaison with a bottle of home-brew. He'd be showing off. And so would she—

Abruptly, Leila picked up the telephone and dialed the police station.

"Look, I know you'll probably think this is a strange thing to ask, but—well, it would mean a lot to me if you could—" and in a slow, halting voice, she made her request.

The detective in charge understood perfectly. Of course he did. If Leila would wait, he would check to see if such information had been recorded.

He returned a few minutes later. "Judging from the dirty dishes

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in the kitchen, ma'am, it would appear that the lady had prepared a stew, with broccoli and baked potatoes."

"Thank you." Leila put down the telephone.

It was in the stew. There was no other way. Arnold had boasted that his lover was a Cordon Bleu cook. She'd be into the herbs and wine and fancy names. Leila could almost hear her voice. "I need some beer for my Boeuf Carbonnade—"

And Arnold had brought her a bottle of poison.

They never woke up, they never woke up. How *could* they? They were already dead.

DETECTIVERSE

GOLF WIDOW

by JAMES A. KNOOP

She murdered her husband
The day that she found
That he and his steno
Were playing a round.

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a NEW short story by

LYNNE BARRETT

It was surely a strange way to make a living, imitating another man. Sometimes Lee thought he was the only one of them who felt its full weirdness. As they moved their gear into the suite of the hotel provided for Talent, the others seemed to take it all for granted. Of course, Baxter had been doing Elvis for ten years. And Jango thought this was just a temporary gig that would bankroll a new band, a new album, where he'd be his punk-rock self. But Lee had never been in show business before. Maybe that was why it kept striking him as something horrifying, bringing the dead to life.

Although "Elvis Lives" is Lynne Barrett's first appearance in EQMM, her stories have been published in Redbook, Quarterly West, Carolina Quarterly, *and many other literary magazines. A collection of her short fiction,* The Land of Go, *was published in 1988 by Carnegie Mellon University Press. She teaches in the creative-writing program at Florida International University, Miami, and several summers ago taught a short writing course, as did your editor, at the International Women's Writing Guild Conference at Skidmore . . .*

ELVIS LIVES

by LYNNE BARRETT

"Vegas ahead—see that glow?" said Mr. Page. "That's the glow of money, babes."

Lee looked up. All the way from Phoenix he'd ignored the others in the car and watched the desert as it turned purple and disap-

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peared, left them rolling through big nothingness. Now lights filled his eyes as they drove into town. Lights zipped and jiggled in the night. Ain't it just like humans, he thought, to set up all this neon, like waving fire in the dark to scare away the beasts, to get rid of your own fear. Lights ascended, filling in a tremendous pink flamingo. There was something silly about Las Vegas—he laughed out loud. "What's so funny, man?" the kid, Jango, asked with that flicker in the upper lip he'd been hired for, that perfect snarl.

Lee shrugged and leaned his cheek against the car window, studying the lights.

"He's just happy 'cause we're finally here," said Baxter. "Here where the big bucks grow and we can pick some, right?" Baxter was a good sort, always carrying Lee and the kid. A pro.

"Just you remember, babes, we're here to collect the bucks, not throw 'em down the slots." Mr. Page pulled into the parking lot of the Golden Pyramid Hotel and Casino. On a huge marquee, yellow on purple spelled out E L V I S, then the letters danced around till they said L I V E S. The lights switched to a display of Elvis's face. "They do that with a computer," said Mr. Page.

Lee, Baxter, and Jango were silent, staring up. The same look came over them, a look that spoke of steamy dreams and sadness women wanted to console. The face—they all three had it. Three Elvises.

It was surely a strange way to make a living, imitating another man. Sometimes Lee thought he was the only one of them who felt its full weirdness. As they moved their gear into the suite of the hotel provided for Talent, the others seemed to take it all for granted. Of course, Baxter had been doing Elvis for ten years. And the kid thought this was just a temporary gig that would bankroll a new band, a new album, where he'd be his punk-rock self, Jango. But Lee had never been in show business before. Maybe that was why it kept striking him as something horrifying, bringing the dead to life.

He threw his suitcase on a bed and went out to the living room where the bar was stocked for Talent. He poured himself a whiskey and carried it back to sip while he unpacked. Or maybe, Lee thought, he was just getting into the role, like Mr. Page said to, understanding Elvis Presley's own hollow feeling. He played the sad, sick Elvis, after all. Maybe his horror was something the man had had himself in his later years as he echoed his own fame.

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Lee snapped open his old leather suitcase, the same valise his mamma had forty years ago when she was on her honeymoon and getting pregnant with him. "Why buy something new?" he'd said when Cherry pestered him before their trip to New York that started all the trouble. "This is leather, the real thing—you can't get that any more."

Cherry admired fresh vinyl, though. Her wish for new things was so strong it tore her up, he could see. Game shows made her cry. She entered sweepstakes, stayed up late at night thinking of new ways to say why she should win in twenty-five words or less. There was so little he could give her, he *had* to let her enter him in the contest the Bragg *Vindicator* ran. New York wanted, as part of its Statue of Liberty extravaganza, dozens of Elvis Presley imitators, and Bragg, Tennessee, was going to send one. Cherry had always fancied he resembled Elvis—she used to roll around with delight when he'd sing "hunka hunka burnin' love" to her in bed. She borrowed a cassette deck and sent a tape of him in, along with a Polaroid taken once at a Halloween party.

When he won, Lee said he didn't have the voice for it, that great voice, but they said no one would notice, there'd be so many others up there, he could mouth the words. He could too sing, Cherry said—oh, she still loved him then—he sang just beautifully in church. There was little enough Cherry was proud of him for any more. They still lived in the trailer on his mamma's land, and now that he'd put it on a cement foundation and built on a porch it seemed all the more permanently true that they were never going to have it any better. He was picking up what jobs he could as an electrician since the profit went out of farming and their part of the country got depressed. A free trip to the Big Apple was maybe what they needed.

And it was fun. Lee liked the pure-dee craziness of the celebration, a whole city in love with itself. Cherry bought one of those Lady Liberty crowns and wore it with a sexy white dress she'd made with just one shoulder to it. When they were riding on the ferry he heard a man say, looking at them, "Duplication is America's fondest dream," and the man's friend laughed and answered, "Such is identity in a manufacturing nation." Lee glared at them, I ain't a duplicate, and anyway, he noticed, they both had the same Fifties' sunglasses and wrinkled jackets as everyone in soda-pop commercials. But when he got to rehearsal with all the other Elvises, he

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knew that, yes, it was hard to see them as real men instead of poor copies.

Because he had some age and gut on him, they put him toward the back, which was just fine. He didn't even feel too embarrassed during the show. After, he and Cherry were partying away when a white-haired man, very sharp in his western-tailored suit, came up and said Lee was just what he needed. Lee laughed loudly and said, "Oh, go on," but Cherry put Mr. Page's card inside her one-strap bra.

And when they were back home and Cherry sighing worse than ever over the slimy thin blond people on *Knots Landing*, Mr. Page showed up, standing on their porch with a big smile. Cherry had called him, but Lee couldn't be mad—it meant she thought he was good for something.

Mr. Page's plan was a show like a biography of Elvis in songs. And he wanted three impersonators. For the kid Elvis, who drove truck and struggled and did those first Sun sessions and Ed Sullivan, he'd found Jango, a California boy with the right hips and snarl. He had Baxter, who had experience doing Elvis at his peak, the movie star, the Sixties Elvis. And he wanted Lee to be late Elvis, Elvis in gargantuan glittery costumes, Elvis on the road, Elvis taking drugs, Elvis strange, Elvis dying. "It's a great part, a tragic role," said Mr. Page. "The King—unable to trust anyone, losing Priscilla, trapped by his own fame—lonely, yes, tormented, yes, but always singing."

"Have you heard me sing?" Lee asked. He was leaning against the fridge in the trailer, drinking a beer.

Mr. Page beamed at his pose, at his belly. "Why, yes," he said. "I listened to the tape your lovely wife sent. You have a fine voice, big whatchacallit, baritone. So you break up a bit now and then or miss a note—that's great, babes, don't you see, it's his emotion, it's his ruin. You'll be beautiful."

And Cherry's eyes were shining and Mr. Page signed Lee up.

"Check, check, one two three," Baxter said into the mike. His dark Presley tones filled the Pharaoh's Lounge, where they'd spent the morning setting up.

"Man, what a system," Jango said to Lee. "If they'd let me do my stuff, my real stuff, on a system like this, I'd be starsville in a minute."

Lee looked over at the kid, who was leaning against an amp in

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the black-leather suit he'd had made after they played Indianapolis. Jango wasn't saving a penny, really—he kept buying star gear.

"Yeah, one of these nights," Jango said, "when I'm in the middle of a number—'All Shook Up,' I think—I'm just gonna switch right into my own material. You remember that song I played you, 'Love's a Tumor'?"

Lee grinned and finished his can of beer. Worst song he'd ever heard in his life.

"Yeah, they'd be shook up then, all right," said Jango.

Mr. Page came over to them. "Go hit some high notes on there, kid," he said, "let's check out the treble." While Jango went over to the mike, Mr. Page said to Lee, "How you doing?"

Lee squatted down by the styrofoam cooler they always stashed behind the drummer's platform, fished out a Coors, popped it open, stood drinking.

"You seem a little down, babes. Can I do something?"

"You can let me out of the contract so I can go on home," Lee said.

"Now, why should I do that? I could never find somebody else as good as you are. Why, you're the bleakest, saddest Elvis I've ever seen. Anyway, what home? But let me fix you up with a little something—some instant cheer, you know?" Mr. Page leaned over and put some capsules into the pocket of Lee's western shirt.

"What home" is right, Lee thought. He dug out one of the pills and washed it down with beer. Why not?

"Yeah, babes," said Mr. Page, "party. Here." He gave Lee a twenty. "After you get through here, go take a shot at the slot machines. But don't bet any more than that, right? We don't want you to lose anything serious."

"Oh, right," said Lee. He moved downstage to where Jango and Baxter were hacking around, singing "Check, Baby, Check" and dancing obscenely.

"My turn," said Lee and they went off so he could do his sound check.

He looked out into the theater filled with little tables set up in semicircles. Looks like a wedding reception, he thought, and laughed and then jumped back—he was always startled when he first heard his voice coming out through the speakers, it sounded so swollen and separate from him. It made him feel shy. He'd been so shy and frightened, he'd had to get drunk as hell the first time they did the show, and he'd been more or less drunk ever since. He started sweating as the men up on the catwalk aimed spots at him. They always

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had different lighting for him because he was bigger than the others. He squinted and went through his poses, singing lines for the sound check. The band took their places and swung in with him for a few bars of "Suspicious Minds," and then he was done and they started working on the band's levels.

He toured around the theater a bit, nodding to the technicians. Everywhere they went, Mr. Page hired local crews and Lee had found they were the only people he felt comfortable with. He'd always been good at electronics, ever since they trained him in the service, and hanging out with those crews the last few months he'd learned a lot. The Golden Pyramid had the most complicated system he'd seen. Up in the control booth, a fellow showed him the setup, talking about pre-sets and digital display. The show always had the backdrop with pictures suggesting what was happening in Elvis's life. Up until now they'd done this with slide projections, but here it would be computerized, same as the sign outside. Lee looked out at the stage and the fellow tapped into a keyboard and showed him Graceland all made of bits of light and then the blazing THE KING LIVES! that would come on with his finale.

He said thanks and made his way back down behind the set. Might be computers that were the brains of it, but there was a whole lot of juice powering the thing back here. Usually, he could stand behind the scrim backstage and follow what was going on, but now he faced a humming wall of wires. He knelt down by a metal box with power cables running out of it and held out his hands. Seemed like he could feel the electricity buzzing right through the air. Or Mr. Page's party pills, maybe.

Lee went through the backstage door and found his way into the casino. Bright? The place made his head whirl. He changed his twenty and the cashier gave him a chit. If he stayed in the casino an hour, he got a free three-minute call anywhere in the country.

He got a waitress to bring him a drink and started feeding quarters into a slot machine. He had a hard time focusing on the figures as they spun. He was buzzed, all right. He tried to go slow. If he made his money last an hour, who would he call?

When they began rehearsing in Nashville, he called Cherry every Saturday. Cherry would put on the egg timer so they'd keep track of the long distance. Mr. Page was giving a stipend, but he said the real bucks would have to wait till they were on the road. Lee, Baxter, and Jango shared a room, twin beds with a pull-out cot, in a motel.

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Mr. Page drilled them every minute, made them walk and dance and smile like Elvis. They practiced their numbers all day and studied Elvis footage at night. To Lee, it was a lot like the service, being apart from Cherry and having all his time accounted for. In '68, when Lee was drafted, Cherry was still in high school—too young, her daddy said, to be engaged. He remembered calling her from boot camp, yearning for the sound of her but terrified when they did talk because she seemed so quiet and far away. Just like she sounded now.

They'd barely started on the road, trying out in Arkansas and Missouri, when Cherry gave him the axe. She'd filed papers, she said when she called. She was charging him with desertion—gone four months now, she said.

"I'll come right back tonight," said Lee.

"I won't be here. You can send the support money through my lawyer." She said she'd hired Shep Stanwix, a fellow Lee knew in high school and never did like. He'd grown up to play golf and politics.

Cherry was still talking about money, how they wanted compensatory damages. "I gave up my career for you, Lee Whitney," she said.

She'd gotten her cosmetology license when they were first married, but she'd never gone past shampoo girl. She always said it was hopeless building up a clientele out there in the country, anyway—everybody already had their regular. Only hair she ever cut was his. She said she liked its darkness and the way it waved up in the front, like Elvis's.

"You can come along with us," Lee said, his voice breaking. "I'll get Mr. Page to hire you on as our hairdresser—he's spending money on that, anyway, dyeing us all blue-black and training our sideburns."

"There's no use talking. It's desertion and that's that."

"But, Cherry, this was all your idea."

"Oops, there's the timer," Cherry said. "Gotta go now."

"Wait—we can keep talking, can't we?"

"Save your money," Cherry said. "I need it." She hung up.

When he called back, he got no answer, then or all night. In the morning he called his mamma and she said Cherry'd been going into town till all hours since the day he left and now she'd taken everything out of the trailer that wasn't attached and moved into Bragg.

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Lee went to Mr. Page—they were playing the Holiday House in Joplin, Missouri—and said he quit. That was when Mr. Page explained that Lee'd signed a personal-service contract for two years with options to renew and no way out. "Anyway," said Mr. Page, "what's one woman more or less? There's plenty of them interested in you—didn't you hear the sobbing over you last night? You were sad, babes, you were moving."

"Ain't the right woman," said Lee.

The women who came to the show only depressed him. Every night, die-hard Elvis Presley fans, women with their hair permed big and their clothes too girlish, were out there sighing, screeching, whimpering over Jango and Baxter and him. They'd come back after the show and flirt—hoping to get back their young dreams, it seemed to Lee, trying to revive what was in truth as lost as Elvis. Baxter took a pretty one to bed now and then—he considered it a right after so much time in the role. But then sometimes Lee wasn't sure Baxter fully realized he wasn't Elvis. Jango confided he found these women "too country." He waited for the big towns and went out in his punk clothes to find teenage girls who'd want him as himself. Lee slept alone, when he could get drunk enough to sleep.

When they were in Oklahoma, he got the forms from Shep Stanwix. He sent Cherry monthly checks. He had more money now than ever in his life and less to spend it on that mattered. Now and then he bought things he thought were pretty—a lapis lazuli pin, a silver bracelet made by Indians—and sent them to Cherry, care of Shep. No message—no words he could think of would change her mind.

One night in Abilene Jango said he was going crazy so far from civilization and good radio and tried to quit. When he understood his contract, he went for Mr. Page in the hotel bar but Lee and Baxter pulled him off. Why? Lee wondered now. They dragged Jango up to his room and Baxter produced some marijuana and the three of them smoked it and discussed their situation.

"It's two years' steady work," Baxter said. "That's hard enough to find."

Lee nodded. He lay back across the bed. The dope made him feel like he was floating.

"Two years!" Jango stood looking at himself in the big mirror. "When two years are up I'll be twenty-three. Man, I'll be *old*."

Lee and Baxter had to laugh at him.

"Thing is," Lee said, "he tricked us."

"Not me," said Baxter. "I read the contract. Why didn't you?"

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Lee remembered Cherry's hand on his shoulder as he signed. Remembered Mr. Page saying what a sweet Miss Liberty she made. And he felt Bax was right, a man's got to take responsibility for his mistakes.

Baxter passed the joint to Jango, who sucked on it and squinted at himself in the mirror.

"Mr. Page is building something up here," Baxter said. "What if we were quitting on him all the time and he had to keep training replacements? As it is—do you know he's hiring on a steady band? They'll travel in a van with the equipment while we go in the car. And he's upgrading the costumes. Not long, he says, till we'll be ready for Vegas. It's like what Colonel Parker did for Elvis."

Jango swiveled his hips slow motion in front of the mirror. " 'Colonel Tom Parker was a show-biz wizard,' " he quoted from his part of the show. He laughed. "Page wrote that. 'He guided me. And I—' " Jango's voice deepened into Memphis throb " '—I came to look upon him as a second father.' Shit. Isn't one enough?"

"My daddy died when I was a boy," said Lee dreamily.

"Mine's a money-grubbing creep," said Jango. "Just like Page."

"'Course, Elvis should have broken with him in the Sixties," Baxter said. "That was his big mistake—he kept doing all those movies exactly alike because the Colonel was afraid to change the formula. No, at the right moment, you've got to make your break."

Jango snarled at the mirror. "I'm gonna save every dollar, and when I've got enough I'm going to rent the best recording studio in L.A. and sing till I get Elvis out of my throat forever."

Lee circled quarters through the machine till they were gone. He hailed a waitress and while buying a drink asked her the time. Four o'clock here. It would be suppertime in Tennessee and darkness falling. Darkness never reached inside the casino, though—there were no windows, no natural light. Could you spend your life here and never feel it? He went and turned in his chit and they let him into a golden mummy case that was a phone booth.

He dialed his mamma. When she heard it was him, she went to turn down the pots on the stove and he was filled with longing for her kitchen. So far off. She exclaimed all right when he told her he was calling from a Las Vegas casino where he was to perform that night, but he could tell it didn't mean much to her, it was too strange.

The telephone glittered with gold spray paint.

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"I only have a minute here, Mamma," he said, "so tell me straight—how's Cherry?"

"She was out here the other day. Kind of surprised me. Listen, Lee, you coming back soon?"

"I don't see how I can. Is something wrong?"

"It's Cherry. I know you're legally separate and all, but I don't think she's as hot on this divorce as she was. I was talking to my friend at the grocery, Maylene, she said to say hey to you—"

"Thirty seconds," said the casino operator.

"Mamma—" Lee's heart was pounding.

"Well, I mentioned Cherry stopping by for no good reason and Maylene said it's all over Bragg that Shep Stanwix dropped her to chase some country-club girl and—not that she deserves you, honey, after how she's acted—but maybe if you get back here right now, before she takes up with anyone else—"

Lee fell into a night with stars in it. When he came to, he was slumped in the golden mummy case and the line was dead. A lady from the casino leaned over him. "I'm fine," he said, "I just forgot my medicine." And he took a pill out of his pocket and washed it down with the last of his whiskey.

The lady was tall and half naked and concerned. "Is it heart trouble?"

"That's right, ma'am," said Lee. "My heart."

They ate dinner in their suite, at a table that rolled into the living room. The hotel sent up champagne in a bucket, for Talent on Opening Night. After they knocked it off, they ordered up some more to have while they got into costume in the mirrored dressing room off Jango's bedroom. Jango was ready first, in black jeans and a silky red shirt.

"Uhwelluh it's one fo the moneyuh," he sang into the mirror, warming up. "Uhwelluh it's one," he sipped champagne, "one fo the moneehah." He looked sulkier every day, Lee thought.

Baxter leaned into the mirror opposite, turning his head to check the length of his sideburns, which weren't quite even. He plucked out a single hair with tweezers. Beside him on the dressing table was a tabloid he'd picked up that had a cover story about how the ghost of Elvis got into a cab and had himself driven out past Graceland, then disappeared. Baxter read all this stuff for research.

"Uhwelluh it's two fo the show, damn it, fo the showowhuh," sang Jango.

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Lee, who was drunk but not yet drunk enough to perform, confronted his costume. Hung up on wooden hangers, it looked like a man he didn't want to be—the vast bell-bottoms, the jacket with shoulders padded like a linebacker's, the belt five inches wide and jewel-encrusted. The whole deal heavy as sin. Lee sighed, took off his shirt and jeans, and stepped into the pants. The satin chilled his legs. He wrapped a dozen scarves around his neck to toss out during the show. He held out his arms and the others lifted the jacket onto him. The top of the sequined collar scratched his ears. He sucked in his stomach so they could fasten the belt on him, but just then Mr. Page breezed in, all snappy and excited.

"You know who we got in the audience tonight, babes? You know who?"

They all just looked at him.

"Alan Spahr!" he crowed. "I'm telling you, Alan *Spahr*. The Dealmaker!"

Baxter said, "What kind of deals?"

"Hollywood deals, babes. Hollywood. The Emerald City. We're talking moolah, we're talking fame, we're talking TV movie. What's this, champagne? Yeah, let's have a toast here." He filled their glasses. "Las Vegas to Hollywood—westward ho, babes, westward ho!"

"The Emerald City," said Lee.

The champagne was cool and sour. He poured some more and flexed his shoulders.

"Listen, man," Jango said. He still held Lee's belt in his hands. It flashed in all the mirrors. "I am not going to Hollywood. There's no way I'm going to play Elvis where anyone I know might see me."

"You won't be playing *in* Hollywood," said Mr. Page. "In fact, if we make this deal I'm going to see to it that the script is expanded—you know, do the whole life, filmed on location. Might even find a child, you know, to play Elvis at six, seven."

The poor kid, thought Lee.

"But a TV movie is on everywhere," said Jango.

"You betcha." Page drank champagne.

"I won't do it." Jango sneered. "Sue me—I don't have anything to lose."

Page leaned close to him. "Oh, no? A lawsuit lasts a long, long time, babes, and I would own all your future work if you quit me. Any albums, any concert tours, I would own your damn poster sales, babes, get it?"

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"Mr. Page," Lee said, "you don't need me and Jango for a TV movie. Baxter is the real talent here. On film they can do everything with light and makeup—Baxter can go from twenty to forty, can't you, Bax?"

Baxter looked up from his tabloid and said, "I know I could do it. It'd be my big break, sir."

"Babes, I can see you wouldn't be anywhere without me," said Mr. Page. "That there's three of you—" and he gestured at the mirrors where, small in his white suit, he was surrounded by ominous Elvises "—that's the whole gimmick. The three stages of the King. And with a TV movie behind us, babes, this show could run forever."

The show was on downstairs. Lee had finished the champagne and switched to whiskey. He had to find the right drunk place to be. The place without thought. Like in the Army. Which he never thought about. Stay stoned, don't think. He checked the clock—lots of time yet. He was in full costume, ready to go. Lee avoided the mirrors. He knew he looked bad. When he was young, he was dark and slim—like an Indian, Cherry used to say. Cherry had loved him. Cherry—better not think about Cherry. Where were his pills? In his shirt, on the floor of the dressing room. He tried to bend, but the belt cut into him, stopped him. He had to kneel, carefully, and then, as he threw back his head to wash down the pill, he saw. Who was that? Down on one knee, huge and glittery, his hair dark blue, his chest pale and puffy, his nose and eyes lost in the weight of his face. He looked like nothing human.

He had to get away. He took the service elevator down. It was smothering in there, but cold in the corridor, cold backstage. Sweat froze on his chest. Jango was on, near the end of his act. Off stage left, Lee saw Baxter talking to Mr. Page. He started toward them, then stopped.

Baxter had Mr. Page by his bolo tie. He pulled him close, shook him, then shoved him onto the floor. Baxter moved through the curtains, going on just as Jango came off with a leap, all hyped with performing and sparkling with sweat. Mr. Page was on his hands and knees, groggy. Jango did a swiveling dance step behind him and kicked out, sending him sprawling again. Then Jango saw Lee, shrugged, snarled, and flashed past.

Lee came forward and Mr. Page grabbed onto him and helped himself up. The old man was flushed—his red scalp glowed through his puffed white hair. He pulled at the big turquoise clasp of his tie

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and squawked. Baxter was singing "Love Me Tender." Lee shushed Mr. Page and led him behind the back wall, where the music was muffled. Page kept shaking his head and squinting. He looked dizzy and mean.

"I got contracts," he said. "There's nothing they can do." He started brushing his suit—dust smeared the white cloth.

Lee held out his shaking hands. "Look—I can't go on."

"Oh, babes, you're a young man still," said Page. "You just gotta cut down on the booze some. Listen, I'll get you something that'll make you feel like a newborn child."

"When I get too old and sick to do this, will you let me free?"

"At that point Baxter'll be ready for your job. And Jango for Baxter's." Page patted his hair.

"And you'll find a new kid."

"That's the way this business goes, babes. You can always find a new kid."

Lee's heart was pounding, pounding. He had to look away from Mr. Page, at the wall of wires, lights, power.

"Yeah, kids are a dime a dozen. But I'll tell you what, babes," said Mr. Page, "you were my greatest find. A magnificent Elvis. So courtly and screwed-up. A dead ringer."

Lee looked away, listening to the noise of his punished heart.

"A dead ringer?" He remembered the first pills Mr. Page handed him, just after Cherry—don't think about Cherry—and Lee knew he would die, would die as Elvis had and never again see his wife, his mother, Tennessee.

"Magnificent," said Mr. Page, "we gotta get that look on film! It's gorgeous, it's ruinous—I tell you, babes, it's practically tragic."

And Lee struck him, with all his weight and rage. Mr. Page fell onto the metal box where the power cables met. Lee bent over him, working fast. Green sparks sizzled around them.

Onstage, Lee was doing the talk section of his last song, "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" He was supposed to get lost, say what he liked, then come back into the lyric with a roar. "Tell me, dear—" he murmured into the mike and remembered Cherry when she was just out of high school. "You were so lovely." Wrapping a towel around him with a hug before she cut his hair. "And I know, I know you cared—but the—" Oh, what went wrong? "What went wrong? You sent me away—"

He stood still and looked out at the people sitting at little tables

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like they were in a nightclub. Well, it is a nightclub, he remembered, a hot spot. And he laughed. "Watch out." He shook his head. "Gotta get straight," he muttered and, looking out, saw tears on faces. "Don't cry for me," he said, "she's waiting." And then the song came back to him as it always returned, the band caught it up, and behind him the wall of light blazed and then ripped open with a force that cast him out into the screaming audience.

Breakfast was cheap here. Even in the diners they had slot machines. Lee drank black coffee and scanned the newspaper. He read how Liberace's ex-chauffeur had plastic surgery to look more like Liberace and about the tragic accident backstage at the Golden Pyramid. The manager of the ELVIS LIVES show had been caught in the electrical fire caused by the new computer system. Now, days after the accident, the newspaper was running follow-up stories about past casino fires.

The first day or so, there had been investigators around, in and out of their suite, but they mostly left Lee alone. He'd been onstage during the fire, when the finale display overburdened the wires, causing a short and an explosion. And there'd been so much emphasis on how complex the system was, digital this and that, no one imagined a hick like Lee could understand it. Even to him, his own quick work seemed now beyond himself, like something done by someone else. Lee supposed the other two thought they'd contributed to Page's death—left him woozy so he passed out backstage and got caught in the fire. But they accepted the explosion as the dazzling act of some god of electricity looking out for them. The second night, when Baxter came in with their contracts, they ripped them up without a word.

A new three-Elvis act was opening soon—Mr. Page had owned *them*, but anyone could use his gimmick. Baxter was staying on in Vegas—he'd pitched himself to Alan Spahr and they were talking about cable. This morning Jango was heading west, Lee east. Wasn't everyone better off? Except Page—better not think about Page. Already he seemed far back in time, almost as far back as things Lee'd done in the Army. Anyway, Lee blamed the pills. He'd sweated himself straight in the hotel sauna and meant to stay that way.

Lee paid for breakfast, picked up his old leather valise, and went outside. This early, you could smell the desert. The sun showed up the smallness of the buildings, their ordinariness squatted beneath

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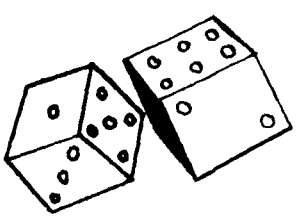
their flamboyant signs. Lee stuck out his thumb and began walking backward.

The trucker who picked him up was heading for Albuquerque. At the truck stop there, Lee drank some beers and hung around till he found a ride through to Memphis. He had resolved to cut back to beer only until he saw Cherry again, but in the middle of the night in Texas he felt so good, heading home, home, home, he wanted to stay up the whole way and bought some speed for himself and the guys who were driving him, and knocked it back with some whiskey the driver had. Home, home, home, they tore along Route 40, through the darkness, listening to the radio. When Elvis came on, they all sang along.

"Hey, Lee, you sound like Elvis. Look a little like him, too," the driver said. He nudged his buddy. "What do you think? Have we picked up Presley's ghost?"

"Naw," said Lee. "He's dead and I'm alive and going home." Sipping whiskey through the night, song after song, he felt so happy he just sang his heart out.



DETECTIVERSE

PARSIMONY DOESN'T PAY

by DOROTHY BELLE POLLACK

A terrible marriage was Jean's.
He was stingy, though rich—they had scenes.
But an "accident" grim
Deprived her of him
And now she's a widow of means.

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

ALAN SKINNER

In two and a half hours Sammy Johnston would climb into the ring. Casey just had to call him to say he got the blackmail evidence and he wouldn't have to throw the fight.

Alan Skinner's short fiction has been published in various publications. His "Christmas Eve" was the cover story in the January 1977 issue of Analog . . .

I CAN'T SEE THE TREES

by ALAN SKINNER

I can't see the road, I can't see the trees—I'm going eighty miles an hour and I can't see motherlovin' nothing. The late-autumn sky is going black and I need headlights to see where the two-lane twists its way through these wooded hills. I need my left arm to hit the light switch, but my left arm is good for nothing except some emergency-room work. I could stop and turn on the lights, sure—except once Metzenbaum comes back to his hunting lodge with whoever he rode off with and finds Schiapelli's body, I'll have very little time.

Then I hit that short stretch of straightaway I knew was along here somewhere and use my knee to hold the steering wheel long enough to reach across and get the headlights switch. The dash lights come on and the clock tells me it's 5:24. Two and a half hours before my client Sammy Johnston climbs into the ring. I just have to call him to say I got the blackmail evidence and he won't have to throw the fight. Simple.

And what do I tell Mindy?

I'm still struggling with an answer miles later as I come up on the blaring neon sign of the Countryside Inn. I see the sign but not the car pulling out of the parking lot until it's almost too late. I

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brake hard, tires screeching, as the other car horn squawks. Gravel grinds rubber as I stand on the brake and my car slithers to a stop. The other driver shouts something out his window as he roars off in indignant fury. My engine gasps and dies, red lights come on all over the dashboard. Two feet in front of my hood is Mindy's brand-new IROC-Z, shining in my now-dim headlights.

I hear the dull thud of the bass beat from the band inside. Over that noise, nobody would have heard my grand entrance. Right hand, open left door. Twisting as I try to get out, I hit my left arm against the frame: a flashfire of pain, and crazy vertigo whirling into blackness.

I wake up, half my face stuck into cold gravel and the other half being stroked by soft, warm, quick fingers. I jerk up, but I hear a breathless voice say, "Casey, it's me," with such sweet concern and pity I nearly sag down there and just wallow in it. Mindy—it's Mindy.

Things get blurry for a moment, misty dream memory: I'm back in last Saturday night, the fragrant darkness of Mindy's bed, her small willowy body yielding to mine as Metzenbaum, Sammy Johnston, the whole rotten business get hazy and far away.

"I've been waiting here for you since—" Her words trail away. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." I roll over so I can get up. She tries to help by pulling on my left arm. I snarl and she lets go.

"What happened to you?"

"Sorry I stood you up for dinner." I want to grin but my face doesn't. She looks down at me, wiping in her skirt the fingers of the hand she tried to take my arm with. In the chilly semidarkness of the parking lot I can't see her face. But her voice is strained, tense. "Your arm—how did you drive so far with it like that?"

"Like—" I repeat, but then a chill sweeps over me, makes me shiver. I cover it by shaking my head quickly and squeeze my eyelids together hard. When I open them, I see clearly again: Mindy standing there against the last traces of a thin dying sunset and the cold high distant stars overhead. I let out a ragged breath.

"Come on, we've got to get you inside." She is sure, commanding. "You have to try to get up."

My body rebels at her order and I shake my head. "No, just get some help. Call somebody. You can't lift me alone."

"Okay." I can tell she's forcing a smile by the sound of her words. "I'll be right back."

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I labor to breathe. "Okay," I pant and don't waste effort trying to smile back. She is gone quickly. I hear her light steps crossing the gravel, turn my head to watch her stride to the inn's front door. I'm on my feet a few seconds later, feeling better for lying down a while.

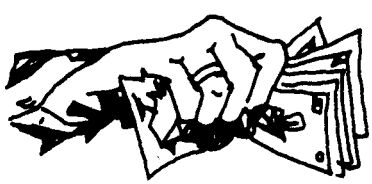
Still, I stagger once on my way to Mindy's car. The hood is warm. Very warm. Luckily my knife is in my right pocket. I open it and crouch next to her left front tire, the car side away from the inn, and slash the valve stem. Air explodes out.

I'm wobbling on the way back to my car, in my view the horizon swinging up and down and tilting, but I make it. I don't have to fake labored breathing now. Only a moment to glance at the inn as I ease behind the wheel: key, gas, start—the motor comes to life in what sounds to me like a thunderous explosion. I fight down the shakes as I ease backward across the lot. Now I *don't* want the damn headlights on—they wave like beacons across the front of the building and there's Mindy charging out the front door. Something glittery in her hand catches a small bit of headlight. I slam the car into first just as I floor the gas pedal. I grab the loose wheel as the tires reach the highway pavement, the sound of my heartbeat so loud in my ears it almost drowns out the screaming engine and the dull, faroff bark of the gun. There's a curve and I lean into it as I hear Mindy fire twice more—then I'm gone, back into darkness.

After I wrestle the car up into fourth, I settle down to think. Nothing else to do now until I get to the next town, twenty miles down. So it had been Mindy as the driver of the mystery car that had taken Metzenbaum away from the lodge just before he gave me Schiapelli to play with. She hadn't been waiting for me all night. Mindy. Of course.

It *is* a long way from Metzenbaum's lodge to the Countryside Inn—except how had she known I'd driven "so far"? Mindy. I should have known it was too good to be true.

The sky is totally black above the trees: moonless, star-dusted, empty. I've a long way to go yet, I think, pressing the accelerator. A long way, all alone.



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a *NEW* Petrella story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

"When I took on my present job," said Lovell, "my first reaction was that we had too many specialist sections, a round dozen private armies. I've managed to cut them down—against considerable opposition, as you may imagine."

Petrella felt that a sympathetic smile would be in order.

"Michael Gilbert can always be depended on to deliver solid reading entertainment," writes Frank Denton in Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers. *"He has created several exceptional series characters, the chief of whom is Patrick Petrella. Followers have watched Petrella deal with blackmail, arson, theft, and murder, while rising steadily from constable to Detective Chief Inspector with the Metropolitan Police."*

In his cover letter with this intriguing new Petrella story, Michael Gilbert said, "It is intended to serve as a curtain-raiser to his new occupation. Act 1 was the young Petrella. Act 2 was Petrella at Q. Act 3 is to be Petrella at Scotland Yard. I am not sure whether it will develop as a series of stories or as a complete novel. Anyway, this one is complete in itself . . ."

DECOY

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"Born?" said the Deputy Commissioner of Metropolitan Police. "Means nothing to me. What does he want?"

"He didn't say, sir. Just that he wanted five minutes of your time."

"If I had five minutes to spare, I can think of five things I could spend them on. If he's got something to say, tell him to put it in writing."

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"Yes, sir."

When his secretary was at the door he added, "I suppose he hasn't got a Christian name."

"I understand it's Howard."

"Howard Bourne! Why on earth didn't you say so?"

The secretary nearly said, "Because you didn't ask." What she really wanted to say was that because he was in a brittle mood—the result of an hour with the Commissioner on Race Relations—there was no need for him to work it off on her. She was not a girl, but a woman of thirty-five, with a mind of her own, and she nearly said it.

"What shall I tell him, sir?"

"Tell him? Don't tell him anything. Just wheel him up."

Howard Bourne! The name took him back more than thirty years, when he had abandoned a dead-end career at the bar to join the Metropolitan Police and they had walked the streets and alleys of Southwark together, creaking in their stiff uniforms and new boots. Since then, they had followed very different paths. He had climbed the dangerous slippery slope to the second highest position in the police hierarchy, ruining his digestion and overtaxing his mind to a point where he was rude to the best secretary he had ever had. How much more sensible Howard had been! Years of slow promotion in one of the South London divisions, followed by his final elevation to the rank of Detective Inspector in the Intelligence branch. By that time his name was one of the best known in the force, not only as a trusted and respected policeman but as a much-sought-after performer at police concerts and an inimitable raconteur.

He jumped up as Bourne came in, grabbed him by the arm, and pushed him into the visitor's chair. "What have you been up to, you old scoundrel?" he said. "Pegged at long last for imitating your superior officers, I suppose."

"Actually," said Bourne, betraying by his accent the Midland city he came from, "I hant been up to nothing. I'm on my way out."

"Already?"

"Age. They boot inspectors out younger than deputy commissioners. Maybe because they work harder."

"Could be. How are you fixed?"

"I'm fixed fine. I've got a wife and a house and enough garden to keep me busy."

"Then you're not thinking of taking up one of those posts in a

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private firm as security officer. After—how long is it?—ten years in the Intelligence section here, you'd be a natural for the job."

"I'd sooner grow roses. And I'll tell you summat about Police Intelligence. It's a two-edged business—times people tell you too much."

"I suppose that's inevitable."

It dawned on him that Bourne had not simply come to say goodbye—though that would have been natural enough—but that he had something he wanted to tell him and that he was finding it difficult to begin.

To help him, he said, "I imagine you must pick up all sorts of odds and ends—some true, some false."

"If they're true, they're useful. If they're downright lies, you can laugh at them. It's when they're half true, or you think they might be half true, that they worry you."

"And what particular half truth is worrying you?" said the Deputy Commissioner softly.

"Before I tell you what it is, I'll tell you two other things. The first is that if I hant been getting out meself I'd never have mentioned it."

"That sounds like running away, Howard."

"Call me any names you like. But what I've got to get across to you is that this isn't information. If t'were information you could do summat about it, get M.S.15 looking into it. But this is just a bad smell and a whisper."

"Point taken. Not easy to investigate a smell. But if there was a whisper someone must have done the whispering."

"That's my second point. If I tell you where I got it from you'll think even less of it."

He paused, clearly unhappy. The Deputy Commissioner sat very still. It was in just this way that, in his term of office, two major scandals had started. A smell and a whisper. He hoped to God this was not going to be the third.

Bourne took a deep breath and said, "I got it from a newspaper man. A chap called Jonathan Carver."

"The name rings a bell."

"He's a special correspondent with the *Sentinel*. Signs his own stuff. That's where you'll have seen his name. He was doing this investigation down on dockside. Race relations."

The Deputy Commissioner said, "Ugh!" And then, "Yes, I remember now. Didn't we give him some facilities in 'X' Division?"

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"Right. If you know someone's going to kick you up the arse, always be polite to him first. Me being Area Intelligence Officer, I guess he thought I was the person to talk to. Not that he'd a lot to tell me."

"I understand that," said the Deputy Commissioner patiently. "He'd got hold of the tail end of some rumor and, being a sensible chap, he thought he'd pass it on."

Bourne nodded. He seemed even less happy than when he had started.

"So what is this tail-end rumor?"

"I'll tell you what it was, then," said Bourne.

As he started talking, the Deputy Commissioner touched the switch under the ledge of his desk which brought his tape recorder into action.

"Where's the skipper got to?" said Detective Lampier.

Sergeant Blencowe, who was teaching himself to type, suspended operations and stretched his cramped fingers. It was a bitter morning in late January and the single-bar electric heater was doing little to raise the temperature in the C.I.D. room.

Sergeant Roughead, who was studying the court circular in *The Times* with his chair tilted back at a dangerous angle against a lukewarm radiator, said, "Covey told me he'd been sent for by the top brass."

Covey was the desk sergeant and was supposed to know where all members of the station were, and sometimes did.

Lampier said, "I remember the skipper once told me—it was when he was up in Highside—he had a message to go down to the Yard to talk about his pension. When he got there he found it was a cover story."

"A cover story for what?" said Roughead. He sounded interested.

"That's where he got a bit cagey. All he said was that it landed him up in some funny business in an East End boys' club."

"I've often told him," said Blencowe, "steer clear of the management. The things they want you to do, they always end in trouble."

"I don't know," said Lampier. "They've got the pick of the stuff up there. Computers, wireless sets, high-powered cars." A high-powered car was his idea of heaven.

"And typewriters that don't stick every time you try the letter E," said Blencowe, hitting the old machine viciously.

Chief Inspector Patrick Petrella, sitting on the edge of his chair

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in the Deputy Commissioner's second-story office overlooking St. James's Park Underground station, would have felt inclined to agree with Blencowe.

It was the second time he had encountered Lovell. On the previous occasion, he had been Assistant Commissioner in charge of the C.I.D. Now he was one step higher. As Deputy Commissioner, he was number two in the Metropolitan force. Petrella knew him for a formidable and devious character.

However, the interview had started in an unalarming way with a dissertation on the central organization. "When I took on my present job," said Lowell, "my first reaction was that we had too many specialist sections, a round dozen private armies. I've managed to cut them down—against considerable opposition, as you may imagine."

Petrella felt that a sympathetic smile would be in order.

"We've run the Flying Squad, the Regional Crime Squad, and the Robbery Squad together. They were all really doing the same job and treading on each other's toes. We got rid of pornography altogether, by handing it over to the uniform branch. And I set up a new outfit, C11—the Central Drugs and Immigration Unit."

At this point, Petrella began trying to fathom the object of the lecture he was being given. Out on the circumference, in the divisions, they had very little idea what was going on at the center and it was certainly interesting and gratifying that he should be taken into the Deputy Commissioner's confidence in this way. It was also puzzling. A possible solution was that he was going to be offered an administrative post at the Yard. And yet—surely all this information could have been given him more simply and through less exalted channels.

As if divining what Petrella was thinking, the Deputy Commissioner abandoned generalities and came to the point with disconcerting suddenness. He said, "A corresponding disadvantage of creating these larger sections was that it put great power into the hands of the men at the top of them. I heard recently, from a source which I trusted, that there is a possibility that some officers near the top of my own brain child, C11, were breaking the rules."

He didn't seem to expect any comment, which was as well because Petrella had nothing to say. He was aware that abuses of power had taken place from time to time. In recent years they had been dealt with very firmly by M.S.15.

The Deputy Commissioner had now swiveled his chair and was

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staring out of the window at the long white frontage of the new Home Office building. A man with a straggling beard was trying to get in and was being handed off by the Commissionaire. He watched for a few seconds and then swung back to Petrella. "You will notice that I chose my language carefully. I spoke of a possibility. It was no more than that. Until it becomes more definite I can't move. When it does, I can hand the matter over to M.S.15. They will do all that is necessary."

Petrella had no comment on that, either. He knew, of course, about M.S.15, which used to be A10—the team which investigated wrongdoing in the force. It had been unpopular at the start, but its successes had earned for it a grudging respect. He had no doubt that M.S.15 could do the job—if there was a job to be done.

"When we set up the Central Drugs and Immigration Unit, it had two main functions. One was to keep an eye on immigrants once they'd been allowed into this country, rechecking their credentials and seeing that they settled down and behaved themselves. The other was coordinating our efforts to stop drugs coming in. You probably realize that once they're in there's nothing much we can do about it."

Petrella nodded. He had personal experience of the hopelessness of tracing the small middleman—and of the mess that drugs made of young lives.

"C11 concentrates on the Port of London and the river from Fulham down to Woolwich. That's mostly 'X' Division, with parts of 'H' and 'J.' That's their hunting ground. You'll find out more about it when you get down there."

This was the first indication of what he was going to be asked to do and Petrella stirred uneasily in his chair. "If C11 are breaking the rules, there are only two ways I can think of. They could be taking money for letting in drugs that ought to be stopped. Or for whitewashing immigrants who ought to be blackwashed. Or both. Maybe you'll be able to think of other ways. Now, for the people concerned."

The Deputy Commissioner had unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out a small file from which he selected several sheets of paper, stapled together. "The man in charge of the unit is Chief Superintendent Campbell-Jones. I don't think you need worry much about him. He's been on extended sick-leave for the last six months. That may be one of the reasons why discipline lower down is slipping. Number two is Detective Superintendent Lamont. These are details

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of his service and confidential reports on him and on all other members of the squad. I think, and hope, they have no idea that these dossiers have been compiled."

He pushed the sheets across the desk to Petrella, who picked them up, folded them, and put them into his inside pocket.

"When you've studied them and formed your own opinion on them, you will burn them."

Petrella nodded. He had pushed the papers over his heart, where they already seemed to weigh heavily. He wondered whether Judas, taking his instructions from Pontius Pilate, had felt the same oppression.

"You'll be attached to 'X' Division and I'll give you my authority—in writing, but use it discreetly—to make such enquiries as you wish. You'll find that your main field will be Gulf Arabs and Pakistanis. The troubles in Iran on one side and Afghanistan on the other are inducing an increasing number to emigrate. Many of them are going to America but a surprising number are coming here. Incidentally, I understand that you speak Arabic."

"Tolerably. A bit rusty now, sir."

"And Urdu?"

"Enough to ask for a cup of tea."

"Luckily, many of the people you will be dealing with probably speak English. Many of them are people of substance. Your real objective will be known only to the Commissioner and myself. If you haven't reached a definite conclusion by—let us say by Easter, that will give you three months—we will call off the operation."

Whilst the Deputy Commissioner was speaking, he had referred from time to time to a list in front of him. As he proceeded, he ticked off the items on it. "You can take not more than two men off Divisional duties to help you. You will have to tell them, of course, what your real objective is. They must be completely reliable and had better be men who have never worked in that area before and are able to fade quietly into the background. Let me know who you pick."

"I can tell you that now, sir. I'll take Detective Lampier. That part of London is his natural background. If he stands still you can't see him. And if I'm allowed a second, it would be Sergeant Roughead."

"Raymond Roughead's boy? The one who went to Eton? I shouldn't have thought that he'd fade very easily into that particular background."

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"I agree," said Petrella. "But I have a feeling he'll be useful all the same."

"It's your choice. Now, as to communications. You'll have a bat phone which will be linked with central control in my private office. Anything you want to say will come straight to me." There was only one more item on the list. Petrella wondered what it was. As the Deputy Commissioner ticked it off, he smiled. "You won't, I think, be displeased when I tell you that the officer currently in charge at Leman Street is Inspector Gwilliam."

"Taffy Gwilliam? Who used to be at Highside?"

"He tells me you know him well."

"Very well, sir. He coached me for my promotion exam. I remember when I asked him why he wasn't going in for it himself, he told me he was always sunk by vulgar fractions."

"He wasn't thinking about vulgar fractions when he jumped on top of the getaway car after the Branding's wage snatch—broke the side window with a piece of iron he'd picked up and knocked out the driver. He's an Inspector now."

"That's the best piece of news I've had today," said Petrella.

"Glad to see you, Patrick," said Inspector Gwilliam.

"And am I glad to see you, Taffy," said Petrella. "A friend in need is a friend indeed."

"A funny sort of job you've been landed with, so I understand. Not that we've been told anything official. Something to do with the blackies—I beg your pardon, with colored gentlemen."

"Yes. That's part of it."

"I've emptied a room for you here. It's at the top of the house, but the stairs lead down to a back entrance, which would be useful if anyone wanted to talk to you privatelike."

"That's fine, Taffy. I'll need some sort of base. But the people I'm interested in will probably open up more if I see them at home, when they get back from work."

This seemed to worry Gwilliam. He said, "Yes. I suppose that's what you'll have to do. All I can say is, if you're out at night, watch out for trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"All sorts. When I remember the nice quiet times we used to have up at Highside I find myself wishing I was back there, with a sergeant's stripes on my arm."

"Tell me more."

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"There's a crowd round here who seem able to make trouble out of anything or nothing at all. I call them the black mafia. Mostly West Indians, but a few from India and the Gulf. They seem to have set themselves up as champions for their black brothers. Give you an example. There was a Pakki who had a fish barrow. He was a perfect pest, setting it up in the main shopping street where no barrows were allowed. We were always moving him on and he was always coming back again, so in the end we had to run him in."

"And they made a fuss about it."

"Fuss! You'd have thought we'd strung him up and burned his barrow. Protest meetings, banners, a deputation trying to get into the Mayor's office. We had to call in help from the other divisions to deal with it and that didn't make us popular."

"Then you're warning me," said Petrella, "to watch my step and not stir up any trouble. I'll watch my step."

It seemed to him that his distasteful mission was going to be even more difficult than he had imagined.

At the end of the first month he sat down in his office, which was not much larger than an exceptionally roomy cupboard, and tried to decide what progress, if any, he had made. In his real job, no progress at all. In his cover job, a certain amount.

Helped by the Community Relations officer, he had interviewed a number of immigrants from the Gulf, from Pakistan, and from India. Almost without exception, he had found them decent, hard-working folk. One thing that surprised him was the speed with which, after the obligatory resistance period, many of them had obtained naturalization certificates. It was explained to him that the important things were that they had learned to speak English—which most of them had, with extraordinary rapidity—and that they could find some respectable person prepared to vouch for them.

None of the people he talked to seemed to be particularly wealthy. "An advantage," said one of the women, who had two teenage sons. "People offer them drugs. If they had money they might buy them. Who knows? As they have not, they cannot."

A surprising benefit from poverty, thought Petrella.

His job brought him into touch with the Customs and Excise officers. He had thought they might resent him, but they turned out to be forthcoming and helpful. One of them, a serious young man

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with a degree in Economics, had opened his heart to him over a few pints of beer one evening.

"Of course we don't think you're butting in," he said. "We need all the help we can get in stopping drugs getting through. This area used to be a soft touch for the smugglers. They'd come in on the cargo boats as deckhands, or stokers, or assistant cooks. All they had to do was slip ashore, dump the stuff, and get back on board. Some of them made half a dozen trips before we caught them. That squad you've set up—C11 you call it—they've been helpful. They've stopped one or two of the holes. But as soon as you stop one, they open up another."

Gwilliam had confirmed this. "Drugs," he said. "And I don't mean reefers, I mean hard stuff. They're becoming as common as cigarettes and it's chiefly the young who go for them."

"And there's nothing we can do about it?"

"I wouldn't say nothing. We can always keep trying. No use sitting back and moaning about it."

"I'm not moaning," said Petrella indignantly. "I'm facing facts."

This conversation happened to take place on a Saturday morning, which gave Gwilliam an idea. "You've been working too hard," he said. "What you need is fresh air and a change of scene. Let's go along to Imber Court. The police are playing Blackheath. Should be some action."

Gwilliam, as Petrella knew, had played rugby football both for the police and the London Welsh and on more than one occasion for Wales. When they got to Imber Court, many of the people there knew him and made him welcome. It was a brisk February afternoon and they avoided the crowded stand and stood behind the ropes along the touch line. Petrella didn't know much about the game, but he soon realized that the efforts of the police team were concentrated on getting the ball out to the two players on the right wing—both powerfully built young men, but fast for all their bulk. From the shouts of the crowd, he gathered that one was called Ronnie and the other Mark.

"Ronnie Banks and Mark Watrous," said Gwilliam. "Worth an England trial, if you ask me. But they won't get one."

"Why not?"

"Got to play for one of the snob clubs to get an England cap. Quins or Wasps."

"I think that's nonsense," said Petrella. It seemed even more nonsensical a few minutes later when Banks, selling a lovely dummy,

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straightened up and went bald-headed for the line, arriving there with a Blackheath player clinging to each of his legs.

In the clubhouse afterward, where Gwilliam knew every other person, Petrella was introduced to the two heroes. They were, he guessed, some years younger than he was and he was surprised to learn that they were Inspectors. Gwilliam had produced pints of beer for all of them—the first of a succession of pints. As the evening went on, Petrella decided that there was more to both of them than mere brawn. Under his thatch of red hair, Banks had a pair of very shrewd blue eyes. Watrous, with his sharp teeth and pointed ears, looked like an amiable young wolf. He wondered what job they did when they weren't playing football, but it was no occasion for talking shop.

On their way home, many hours later, Gwilliam told him. "You wouldn't guess it," he said, "but they're both in M.S.15."

Petrella agreed that he would not have guessed it. He had pictured M.S.15 as being composed of serious and scholarly men who studied dossiers and compiled evidence against their fellow policemen.

"The Deputy Commissioner usually picks types who can look after themselves. Sensible, really. M.S.15 wasn't exactly popular, not to start with. It's accepted now."

"They've certainly accepted that pair," said Petrella.

On the following Monday, when he was sitting in his office studying a list of names supplied by the Community Relations officer and wondering which of them he should visit first, Gwilliam poked his head round the door and said, "Got a visitor for you, Patrick. If I'd realized how small this room was, I'd have found you something bigger. Would you care to use my room?"

"This'll do very nicely," said the bulky man behind him. Petrella didn't need to be told who he was. He had been expecting his arrival any time for the past month and had not been looking forward to it.

In the continued absence of Campbell-Jones, Superintendent Lionel Lamont had headed the Central Drugs and Immigration Unit for more than six months. It was expected that he would shortly be given a step up and confirmed in actual charge. He was an impressive figure of a man as he squeezed through the door and settled down with a grunt onto the only other chair in the room. But not a very healthy one, Petrella thought. The effort of climbing two flights of stairs had suffused his face with red and he was sweating.

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When he had got his breath back, he said, "I met your father once. When I was doing a job in Tangier. I trust he's well."

"Very well. He's retired and growing oranges."

"Lucky man." This opening gambit having been disposed of, a short silence ensued. Then Lamont said, "I suppose you're allowed to tell me what you're up to."

"Of course, sir."

"I understand you've been visiting around among our friends from the Gulf and India."

"That's really almost all I have done—so far. It's been a routine job—interesting, and, in a way, surprising."

"Surprising? How?"

"It was the speed with which most of them have settled down. Great credit to them, of course—"

"Of course, of course. And that was the whole of your job, was it?"

Petrella said cautiously, "There was a second leg to it. I was to find out anything I could about the import of illegal drugs and help—I won't say to stop it, but to keep it within limits. A heartbreaking job."

"Heartbreaking, indeed," said Lamont. He seemed easier now. As he talked, Petrella noticed a curious mannerism. He kept scratching with the nail of his forefinger on his trouser-covered thigh, as though there was something just above the knee and under the cloth that was irritating him. He said, "You've been in the force long enough, Inspector, to realize that we are an army of occupation in enemy country."

"Well—"

"Enemy country. I'm not exaggerating. And that means that we have to stand together. Any information should be shared."

"Of course."

"And we must help each other, even if we have to cut a few corners to do so."

It was the old appeal. Loyalty to one's own side and devil take the opposition. And there was no doubt Lamont meant it. He was leaning forward now and sweating so heavily that Petrella wondered for a moment if he was going to pass out. He said, "It's close in here, sir. I'll open the window."

"Don't bother," said Lamont. "I'm all right." He scrambled to his feet. "But remember what I said. You know where I live. If you've anything to tell me, don't hesitate. Come straight along." There was more than sincerity in this. An undercurrent, almost of desperation.

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Petrella got to the door ahead of him, held it open, and watched him lurch down the passage and negotiate the first flight of stairs. Then he went back to his own room and from the window which looked down on the street watched Lamont get into his handsome car and drive away. He was badly worried. Lamont was a step ahead of him in rank. Must very soon be two steps. It was as though a captain in a regiment had been called on to investigate his own colonel. He shook his head angrily. He had dealt with him as fairly as his difficult position allowed. He had told him the truth and nothing but the truth. But not the whole truth.

A week before, there had been a single, very faint glimmer of light in the darkness. It had appeared when he was questioning a Pakistani fruit salesman called Jampatsingh. He had found him at home with his wife and family. The man had answered his questions, but reluctantly. To prod him along a bit, Petrella had congratulated him on obtaining his naturalization certificate, which had just come through. This had produced a spark of feeling. Yes, the man had said, it was satisfactory. Two men of standing in the City had been prepared to countersign his application.

His wife, who was sitting in the corner of the room, had added, "At a cost." She had said it very quietly, but Petrella had heard it. So had her husband. The look he gave her had promised trouble.

So. It seemed that naturalization could be bought. For how much? And paid to whom?

It was time to get some help.

That evening, at six o'clock, Petrella bought a ticket for the back stalls at the Regal Cinema in Deptford High Street. There were four cinemas in the area, none of them much frequented, victims of television and bingo. Having left both of his assistants to their own devices for a month, from now on he had a standing date with Lampier each Monday at a different cinema. He found him waiting in the deserted back row.

"Very glad to see you, skipper. No one knocked you off yet?"

"Knocked *me* off," said Petrella. "I'm a respectable copper working in a police station. It's you I was worried about."

"No need to worry. I'm one of the boys. You know that YMCA hostel I got into? Didn't take me long to find out that half the young Christians are juvenile delinquents and the other half are working hard to qualify."

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Petrella had never doubted Lampier's ability to fall on his feet. He said, "Have you got anything useful out of your fellow criminals?"

"Nothing special. But I can tell you one thing. The amount of drugs that have been coming in lately makes your hair stand on end. Honestly, you can almost buy shmeck and charley at the supermarket."

"When you say lately, what exactly do you mean?"

"About the last six months."

Petrella thought about this whilst a young lady, in close shot, with a wobbling larynx sang to them about hills and thrills and daffodils. What Lampier had told him fitted in with an idea that was forming slowly at the back of his mind.

He said, "Have you picked up any gossip about Lamont?"

"I wouldn't say he was exactly a favorite character in our pad. Most of them know who he is and what his job is. One creep said he reckoned Lammy was on the hard stuff himself. But I expect he was just shooting his mouth off."

Petrella thought about Lamont's red and sweating face and the involuntary twitching of his hand. If true, it opened up a startling and disagreeable vista.

"What they talk about is that lovely car of his. It's a custom-built Mercedes D.19. Can't be more than a hundred of them in the country. List price seventeen thousand, five hundred pounds."

Petrella accepted this as gospel. Lampier's knowledge of cars was accurate and far-reaching.

As though aware that his bulletin of information had been disappointing, Lampier said, "There was one other thing. You know an old girl called Mrs. Jampot?"

Petrella, whose mind had been momentarily diverted to a consideration of whether if the singer opened her mouth even wider they would be able to see her tonsils, came suddenly back to attention. "Jampatsingh," he said. "Yes. What about her?"

"She turned up at the shops one morning with a face like someone had run a lawn mower over it. The story was you'd tried to get some info out of her and when she wouldn't sing you'd worked her over."

"For Christ's sake!" said Petrella.

"When it was put to me, I said it was typical. The sort of thing the law did every day of their lives. I had to say that, naturally. Of course, I didn't really believe it."

"Well, thank you."

"I'm only telling you because I think you'd better watch out.

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There's a bunch of them work up a lot of feeling about a thing like that."

"I have been warned," said Petrella.

He had noticed, recently, that when he went out for lunch, or for a drink in the evening, Gwilliam usually made some excuse to come with him. The reason for this was now becoming apparent. It seemed to him that the quicker he finished the job the better.

Next morning, after some careful telephoning, he arranged to contact Sergeant Milo Roughead. That young man had experienced no difficulty in camouflaging himself. He had got in touch with one of his many influential relatives, an uncle on his mother's side, who was senior partner in a firm of stockbrokers. When Milo had left Eton, this uncle had offered him a job, which he had refused. He was delighted to learn now that Milo was abandoning the police and he was only too willing to take him on as a learner. Instead, therefore, of spending his days in the discomfort of the C.I.D. room at Patten Street, he sauntered out every morning from his mother's flat to a centrally heated, air-conditioned office. It made, he thought, a nice change.

He seemed to spend much of his time in the City bars and lunch clubs where congregated the gilded young in the service of Mammon. It was in the dining room of one of these institutions that Petrella found him. "You mustn't think, sir," he said earnestly, over a preliminary drink, "that I'm wasting my time. When my uncle suggests that I ought to spend most of my day glued to my desk I tell him that what I'm doing is assimilating atmosphere."

"And does he believe you?"

"He's pretty tolerant. Actually, I suspect that he's angling for business from my father's side of the family. Would you like scampi? They do them rather well here."

"I'm sure I'd like them very much. But I'd also like to know if you've got anywhere at all with the enquiry I asked you to make."

This was said so coldly that it had the effect of turning a young financier into a detective sergeant.

"I've been asking around about that journalist chap, Jonathan Carver. No luck there. He's gone to America. No one seems to know why."

"He went," said Petrella, "because he was frightened."

"But I did get hold of one thing, though I'm not sure what it means. I got it from a chap who's a friend of a chap I was at school with.

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That makes it a bit second-hand, but I think it's reliable. This chap is in property—"

"Which chap?"

"The first one. He says that more than a year ago Lamont bought an option in a dockside development. Not in his own name, of course. He did it through a private company, but these things get out."

"I suppose so."

"Secrets don't stay that way for long in this neck of the woods. The way I heard it, it was more a deposit. He had to put down a third of the agreed purchase price. But here's the odd thing. When the time came—about three months ago—for him to take up this option, he hadn't the cash to do it with. By that time the scheme had come good. If he could have completed the purchase, he'd have made a real killing."

"But he couldn't."

"He couldn't do it himself, and by that time his credit was so shaky that no one would lend him the money. So someone else stepped in and picked the plums."

"Why was his credit shaky?"

"The usual thing. Someone starts a whisper and before you know where you are white's become grey and grey's become black. In his case, I gather, what started it was that he was finding it difficult to keep up the payments on that lovely German bus of his. Here comes the food."

Petrella paid little attention to the scampi—which were, in fact, excellent. A picture was forming of which he could see the outlines, but not the details. He said, "Have you heard of people taking money for backing applications for naturalization?"

"That's a new one on me," said Milo. "But it doesn't surprise me. Two years ago it wouldn't have seemed likely, but since the October smash there are quite a few people around who wouldn't say no to a thousand in cash if all they had to do was say that some Indian character was an old friend and a thoroughly reliable type. What about cutlets?"

"Lovely," said Petrella. When the waiter had removed the plates and was out of earshot, Milo added, "Shoot me down if I'm out of order, but from what you told me your present job is to get Superintendent Lamont lined up for the high jump."

"*If* he's breaking the rules, yes."

"Well, it seems pretty clear that he's heading for bankruptcy.

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When that happens, he'll be slung out anyway. Why not just let it happen?"

"It might be an answer," said Petrella slowly. "But I'm beginning to think that it wouldn't be the whole answer."

Back in his office, he tried to straighten out his thoughts. A year ago Lamont had money. He had no idea what a third share in a building estate would cost, but it must have been a large sum. And it hadn't come from his family. No rich wife, no wealthy relatives—that much was clear from the dossier he had seen. So where had it come from? No prize for guessing the answer to that. From the pockets of a steady inflow of immigrants. Money to get them in. Money to fix their naturalization. But—and here was the real puzzle—why had the money supply stopped, or, at least, diminished? Something had happened. Something that had brought Lamont close to breaking point. And if, into the bargain, he had started taking drugs, that wouldn't have helped him, either.

He saw that there was a note on his in-tray from Gwilliam. It said, "Someone telephoned and left a message for you. 'Tomorrow Plaz Fifteen hundred Red.' Means nothing to me. Perhaps it does to you."

Petrella understood it. When he got to the Plaza Cinema at three o'clock, it had only just opened and Lampier was waiting for him at the back of the deserted auditorium.

"I thought you ought to have this soonest, skipper," he said. "I couldn't reach Mrs. Jampot. She's being kept pretty well under hatches by her husband and his strong-arm friends, but I've been in touch with one of her sons. A boy called Sammy. What he said was that his mother hadn't forgiven her old man for beating her up—not by a long chalk she hadn't—and she'd like a chance to tell you one or two things about him. Things not to his credit—and if they got him into trouble, so much the better."

While Lampier had been talking, Petrella had been thinking hard. He said, "There's nothing I'd like more than a word with Sammy's mother, but I don't see how we're to arrange it."

"I might persuade Sammy to come to you, after dark, via your back door. He's a slim kid and I reckon he could manage it without attracting attention."

"That's an idea," said Petrella. "In fact, it's a damn good idea. His mother talks to him and he talks to me. Do you think you could fix it?"

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"Do my best. I'll slide off now. I don't think this film's in my line. Something about female American coppers."

On the evening of the second day, Sammy arrived. He made no noise when coming upstairs, opened the door without knocking, and slid into the room like a shadow. Then he started talking in broken English.

It was a monologue, not a dialogue. He had been told exactly what to say and had learned it by heart. Certainly the information he had brought shed light in a number of dark corners. But at the end, when Petrella started to ask questions, it was apparent that the boy had shot his bolt. He was apologetic. He had told all that he knew. If he had known more, he could have told more.

Petrella thanked him and rewarded him appropriately. After the boy had slid out, as quietly as he had come, he sat back to think.

It was tantalizing. Lovell had said that the rumors about Lamont were too vague and indefinite for him to take the logical step of moving M.S.15 into action. What he had now found out was both clear and definite, but it still lacked proof. He needed hard facts—names, dates, amounts of money, methods of payment. And he was sure that he could get this, or most of it, from Mrs. Jampatsingh, whom he had as much chance of visiting as of getting to the North Pole in bedroom slippers.

Two days, he thought. I'll give it two days. Then I'll report, in writing, and clear out. Which would, he realized, be a great relief to Gwilliam, who was becoming more and more worried about his safety.

On the following afternoon, when he was putting the finishing touches to his report, the telephone rang. The desk sergeant said, "I've got a call for you. It's from your uncle."

This seemed to Petrella to be improbable. His wife was six months' pregnant and his only uncle, a man of some substance, had taken her and their son to Nassau for some winter sunshine. He said, "Put him through," and was not surprised to hear the apologetic voice of Detective Constable Lampier.

"Sorry to break the rules," he said, "but you ought to have this at once. According to Sammy, his mother has scampered."

"Run away? Where to?"

"She's taken refuge with their priest. A very holy character indeed, respected by all. Even when her husband and his friends find out where she's gone, they'll think twice about dragging her out. How-

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ever, it occurred to me that if you got round quick you might be ahead of the opposition."

"Address."

"It's 4 Barnaby Street. If you're going, I'll come along, too."

"No," said Petrella. "There's no reason for you to join in. But if I should get into trouble, there's a report which I'm finishing now, which I'll leave on my desk. I want you to see that it gets to the Deputy Commissioner. Understood?"

Lampier understood what Petrella was saying and disapproved strongly of him going into danger unprotected.

Had he known, Petrella had no intention of going in unprotected. It seemed to him to be the moment to use his radio link with Central.

That afternoon he paid a visit to the Public Library. As he went, he was conscious of people watching him. Not all of them were hostile, some simply curious. In the reference section of the Library he found what he wanted. A map of scale large enough to show streets and individual buildings.

Barnaby Street was a dead end, running up to the railway. The seven cottages on the left, of which No. 4 was presumably the middle one, had back gardens the ends of which overlooked Barnaby Passage. This also was blocked at the far end by the railway and on the other side by the wall of a factory building. He would have been happier if there had been a second way out of the passage.

It was eight o'clock when he let himself out of the side door of the police station. He was wearing a pair of rope-soled shoes and a dark pullover. It was a night of gusty wind, with spatters of rain as the clouds raced across the moon.

He reached Barnaby Passage without trouble. Such people as he met were hurrying home to warmth and light. There was no back gate to any of the gardens, but the fences were low enough to scramble over, the only obstacle being a line of rusty barbed wire along the top. Using his gloved hand, he jerked this away from the staples that held it and climbed over, leaving the wire hanging.

There was a light in the back kitchen. He rapped on the door, and after some seconds it was opened by a white-haired, white-bearded Indian, who regarded him placidly for a moment and then said, "Please to come in. You wish for Mrs. Jampatsingh, perhaps. She is in the back room upstairs. Go up, please."

It was not a large room and it was occupied to bursting point by the woman, her two daughters, her son Sammy, and much of their

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belongings. Petrella said, rather hopelessly, "I wanted to speak to you alone. Isn't there somewhere the children could go?"

"Where?"

A difficult question. But Sammy, who seemed to be enjoying the situation, said, "There is an empty room at the top. I will show them." He bustled his sisters out, turned round to grin, and went out, shutting the door behind him.

"We may not have much time," said Petrella, "so let me ask you at once the things I want to know. Your husband paid money to some businessman in the City to support his application. There must have been some writing involved."

"There was writing. I have part of it here."

She opened one of the bags on the floor and pulled out a half sheet of office notepaper. As she handed it to Petrella, he could see that the name and address at the top had been torn off, but there was a signature at the bottom.

"Thank you. Next thing: the drugs your husband had to bring with him, what were they?"

"Cocaine. In very small packets. We all had to hide them in our clothes. Even the children."

"And how much did the man here pay for them?"

She said bitterly, "Less than half as much as we had paid to the supplier."

A clatter of feet on the stairs. It was Sammy. He was still more excited than scared. He said, "Men are coming—they are at the front!"

Petrella said, "Then I shall have to go. Will you be all right?"

The woman said, "As long as we stay here, yes."

Petrella wasted no further time. Within seconds he was out of the kitchen door. Racing down the short length of the back garden, he threw himself over the fence. But quick as he had been, others had been quicker. The open end of Barnaby Passage gave onto the High Street—by its light he could see that five or six men were turning into the passage. It was the only way out and his slender hope lay in surprise. Keeping as far as possible in the shadow of the farther wall, he edged his way along until he was within a few yards of the men. Then he launched himself forward.

There were two men in front and four more behind them. There was no way round. He had to go between the front two. They were taken by surprise, but reacted quickly enough to grab one of his arms each. At this point, Petrella lost hope. In his mind was a picture

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of the policeman who had been hacked to death by a mob of West Indians. That was going to happen to him. It was going to happen now. Even if he wrenched clear of the two men who were holding him, the other four would stop him.

A car was coming down the High Street, headlights on and siren blaring. It executed a skid turn and headed straight into the passage. The four men threw themselves wildly out of the way. One of them screamed as the car hit him. The next moment the driver and passenger were out. Petrella caught a glimpse of a red head which he had last seen diving across the line at Imber Court and realized that his arms were free. Both his attackers had fallen back. One was holding his face in hands through which blood was dripping.

"Time to go," said the driver. Petrella found himself in the car, which had shot into reverse, pivoted as it reached the street, and roared off.

"Kill the headlights and siren, Mark," said Banks.

"Willingly," said Watrous, "if you'll stop driving at eighty miles an hour in a built-up area. I think," he added, "that our friend could do with a drink."

"Fair enough. We'll make for the Wapping Giant."

Five minutes later they were installed in the back room of that riverside public house. There was a cheerful fire in the grate. To the landlord, who had shown them in and who seemed to be an old friend, Banks said, "Double Scotches all round, Joe. And see if you can keep other people out for a bit." And to Petrella, "You all right? You've been very quiet."

"I'm just beginning to believe that I might, possibly, be going to survive. And by the way, thank you."

"A pleasure. We enjoy dealing with this rabble, don't we, Mark?"

Watrous grinned and said, "Easy meat, if you've got a car like ours. Heavy-duty Land Rover. Wonderful little bus. Got a lock like a London taxi."

"I must confess I thought that when he got my message the Deputy Commissioner would turn out the heavy mob."

"We're an army in ourselves," said Banks modestly. "But you realize it had to be us. We're the only people at H.Q. who know what you're up to."

"Of course. Stupid of me."

"We've been kept in the picture because as soon as you've got the lowdown on Lammy we shall have to take over."

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"I've got nine-tenths of the lowdown. Maybe the Deputy Commissioner will let me go for the last tenth, or more likely he'll tell me to hand it over to you now. Which I'll do very willingly. All I want is to get back to nice quiet Divisional work."

Both men laughed. Banks said, "Spill."

"It's a sweet little racket, with more than one string to it. A businessman wants to clear out of one of those Middle East or Indian trouble spots. He's told how to do it. Emigration made easy. He has to buy a specified amount of hard drugs and take them with him. Not all of them will get through, but a lot will. When he hands the drugs over, here, he will get back part of the money he paid for the stuff. Less than half, said that woman I was talking to. That's the first step. Later, maybe, he has to find the fee for quick naturalization. I've got the name of one of the City sharks who was at that end of the game. Once he got his hands on the drugs, Lamont was well placed to dispose of them. That's how he lined his own pocket. Something seems to have gone wrong lately. Maybe it's not important, but I'd like to find out what it was and finish the job."

"And that's what you're planning to do?"

"If I'm allowed to. My report goes in tomorrow, and if I get the go-ahead I'll tackle Lamont at once. The sooner the better."

Watrous said, "Is it true he's a druggy himself?"

"I got that impression when I saw him. In fact, I thought for a moment that he was going to come across. Now that I've got evidence of one specific case, I think he'll crumble."

"He'll come apart in your hands," said Banks. "And the best of British Luck to you. I think you deserve one more shot of Joe's excellent malt whisky and then we'll drive you home."

On the following morning, Petrella finished his written report and Gwilliam arranged for it to be delivered by hand at the Yard. He said, "I don't know what's happened, but the heat seems to be off you a bit. All the same, I shouldn't stray far from the station."

Petrella had no intention of straying. He was waiting for a message. It arrived, also by hand, on the following afternoon and came from the Deputy Commissioner's office. It said, "Carry on. You'll find Lamont at home tomorrow evening."

On the following evening, by ten o'clock, the sky had cleared and it was a bright, cold night under a moon that was nearly full. Lamont's house was a handsome building, standing in its own grounds, on the northern fringe of Blackheath. When Petrella knocked, it

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was Lamont who opened the door to him. He said, with the ghost of a smile on a face that was white as paper, "Have to be my own butler. I'm alone in the house these days. I've sent my wife away to her mother in the country. In a way, it makes things easier."

He had himself in hand, but his eyes were jumping.

"I gather from what I was told on the telephone that this is the end of the road. In a lot of ways it's a relief. I imagine you've got one of those recording gadgets with you."

"I switched it on when I came in."

"Come along to my office."

After that, Lamont spoke for ten minutes, in a level, almost uninterested voice, as though he was describing the experiences of a third party. At the end of it Petrella had an important decision to make. Now that everything had become clear to him, he didn't know whether Lamont or he stood in the greater danger. And the danger was there, no doubt about it, in the corners of the empty house, and in the deserted streets outside.

The police runabout, which Gwilliam had lent him, was parked twenty yards down the road which ran along the side of Lamont's house. Twenty yards of possible ambush.

He was halfway there when the attack came in. The car, driving on sidelights, turned the corner and came straight at him. He was in two minds as to whether he might reach his own car, and the indecision nearly cost him his life. The other car was coming much faster than he had imagined and as he jumped to one side it swerved after him. He was nearly clear, but not quite. Something—it may have been the wing mirror—hit him and he went down. Lying there, he could see the Land Rover turning. He remembered Watrous saying, with his wolf's grin, "Wonderful little bus, got a lock like a London taxi." And unless he kept his nerve, the wonderful little bus was going to run right over him.

He was lying on his side and had to remain still and apparently unconscious until the very last moment. If he moved too soon or gave any sign of life, the car would come after him. There was no comfortable ditch to shelter him, just a stretch of grass.

Once again the speed of the car deceived him and he nearly left it too late. As he levered himself over in a frantic, last-minute roll, the rear wheel of the car went over his left hand.

Five yards up the road, the Land Rover jerked to a halt and Banks jumped out and ran back. He was holding what looked like an iron tire-lever. With it, he swung a savage blow at Petrella's head. The

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only defense left to him was to move. He jerked his head to one side and the blow landed on his shoulder. Almost the last thing he heard was the crack of his collarbone breaking. Then the night was full of noise and lights and, incredibly, it was Gwilliam who was bending over him.

When he regained consciousness, Gwilliam was still there and he imagined for a moment that he was on the grass by the roadside. Then he saw the white walls and the sun reflected from the polished floor and realized that he was in hospital. His hand had been heavily bandaged and there was some contraption round his left shoulder, but apart from this physical damage he felt surprisingly clear-headed. "What on earth are you doing here, Taffy?"

"I'm here because the Deputy Commissioner sent for me yesterday afternoon and put me in the picture."

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind putting me in the picture."

"It was quite simple, really—insofar as anything that old snake thought up could be described as simple. He'd been warned by Howard Bourne—what a character, you ought to have heard him taking off the top brass—"

"Warned about what?"

"Why, that some of the leading lights in M.S.15 were running a private racket."

"Yes. Lamont told me about that. It's all on the tape. In his case, as the price of not reporting him, they took two-thirds of what he got. A third for Banks and a third for Watrous."

"What a pair." Gwilliam was finding it difficult to keep the admiration out of his voice. He could still see them scoring tries. "Well, Bourne didn't know the details. It was just something that newspaperman had picked up. But if it was true, no question, it put the Deputy Commissioner on the spot. Normally he'd use M.S.15 to investigate a rumor like that, but he could hardly ask them to investigate themselves."

"Difficult. So he put me in after Lamont and M.S.15 after me."

"That's about the size of it. That time, when you were on the wrong track, he sent them to help you. When you were heading for the right track, he sent them after you again. The difference in this case was that he sent half the Flying Squad after them."

"With orders to do nothing until those two beauties had nearly killed me."

"Well, you see," said Gwilliam apologetically, "he didn't know

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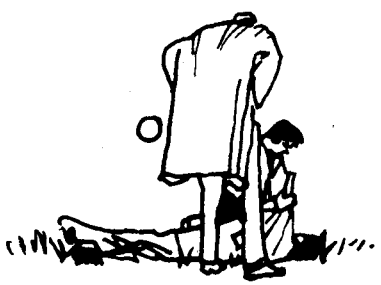
then what you'd got on that tape, so he wanted a water-tight charge. Attempted murder, with a dozen witnesses."

Petrella thought about it. He said, "Just how did that pair think they were going to get away with it?"

"Oh, I expect they had it all worked out. Once they'd got the tape off you and slung your body into Lamont's garden, all they had to do was shoot him and leave him with the gun in his hand. Assumption: you'd accused him, and he lost his temper and hit you—harder than he meant. Finds himself with a corpse on his hands and nowhere to turn. Takes his own life. End of story."

"End of story," said Petrella, shifting his position to ease the ache in his shoulder. "I'm beginning to think that what Blencowe told me was true. Steer clear of the management, he used to say. The things they want you to do always end in trouble."



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HOTLINE MAILORDER BUYERS! Eager Opportunity Seekers, MLM Participants! Adhesive Labels. 200/$5; 500/$8; 1,000/$14; 2,000/$25; 5,000/$55; 10,000/$99; 20,000/$175; 50,000/$369. QUALITY LISTS, Box 1305-FL, Seaford, NY 11783. VISA/MC/COD. (800) 356-6392.

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MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing Mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start Immediately! Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-DCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-9983.

"JANITORIAL BUSINESS MONEYMAKING SECRETS." Free Report! Make $25,000-$100,000+ annually! MBM, Box 159D, Junction City, CA 96048.

$225 Daily "Chrome Plating" Auto Parts, Motorcycles, Inexpensive, Easy, (Free) Information: Chrome City, Box 2285, Waldorf, Maryland 20604.

READ "How To Write a Classified Ad That Pulls." Instructive booklet tells how to write an effective classified ad. Also includes certificate worth $5.00 toward a classified ad in any of our publications. For your copy send $3.25 (includes postage) to Davis Publications, Inc., Dept. CL, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

NEW IMPORTS: Foreign manufacturers offering direct. Free information. International Intertrade Newsletter, Box 636-AA, Newark, NJ 07101.

MONEY! From Product in Demand. Guaranteed Free Information. Box 384, Station A, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8V4 Canada.

HOMEWORKERS WANTED!! Pleasant work-!. . .Top pay!. . .Free Supplies!. . .Details: "Successful Systems," Box 815-X, Flushing, NY 11362.

DRUG RAID SEIZURES. Buy Cheap Autos, Houses, Boats - Everything GUARANTEED! Rush Addressed Stamped Envelope: GEE GEE ADVERTISING, 418A Antares, Corpus Christi, TX 78418.

TREMENDOUS PROFITS! Successful, Professional Income Plans. FREE DETAILS! $2.00 for postage (refundable). Malcomson Consumer Services, Box 126-IO890, Timmins, Ontario, Canada P4N-7C9.

MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

MONEYMAKING BONANZA! Mail our weight-loss advertisements from home! Enclose Stamp! — Midwest Pharmacals, 3400 — 111th #160, Chicago, IL 60655.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS! Fantastic Home Business. No investment. Cash Bonuses, Unlimited Income. Information: REWARDS UNLIMITED, 4928 E. Tropicana, Ste. 143, Las Vegas, NV 89121.

START Your Own Business AT Home without capital. Open to all hardworking people who can follow instructions. All inventory and bookkeeping handled by parent company. Long, self-addressed stamped envelope: KLM, 13324 Hawthorne/Suite 1341, Hawthorne, CA 90250.

$1,000's from Catalog Sales. $2.00. GTY Enterprise, 6701 Desoto 130, Canoga Park, CA 91303.

HOW TO START AND OPERATE your own Profitable Mail Order Business At Home. Send $12.00 Plus SASE to : Greg Johnson, Box 2211, Benicia, CA 94510.

CO-PUBLISH AN ESTABLISHED INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR UNDER $100.00. SAMPLE AND INFORMATION $5.00. MARISA, 1041 ALDER AVE., ORLANDO, FL 32807.

FREE MONEY: Business Use, Personal Use. Grant money available! Complete program catalog $7.00: Success, P.O. Box 42, Piqua, Ohio 45356.

L'AROME (UK). Britain's most successful multi-level marketing company. Now launched USA. SECURE YOUR FUTURE - DO IT NOW. For details: 21 Acacia Avenue, Chapelton, Sheffield, S30 4PQ, England.

BE YOUR OWN BOSS! Full time pay, part time hours. RSE, 5708 Sutter, Carmichael, CA 95608.

YOU'LL MAKE MONEY

SAVE MONEY TOO— BY READING and ANSWERING THESE CLASSIFIED ADS

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Classified Continued

PERSONAL

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE GENTLEMEN seek American ladies & gentlemen for Friendship/Romance/Marriage! Free details: English Rose Agency, 2nd Floor, Mill Lane House, Mill Lane, Margate, Kent, England. Tel: 01144-843-290735.

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Refined, sincere people. 18-80. Identity. Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948. (415) 897-2742.

MEN! Loving, pretty girls want to meet you. Free information! Merit, Box 74758-DP, Los Angeles, California 90004.

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS SEEK FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE. American—Mexican—Philippine—European. Photo selection FREE! Latins, Box 1716-DD, Chula Vista, CA 92012.

COMPUTERIZED ASTROLOGY Chartwheels, Horoscopes & Profile Printouts. From $5. SASE For Catalog: Dept. AH-1, Box 18943, Charlotte, NC 28218-0943.

NICE SINGLES with Christian values wish to meet others. FREE magazine. Send age, interests. Singles, P.O. Box 310-IO, Allardt, TN 38504.

BEAUTIFUL ENGLISH SPEAKING Filipinas want men of all ages as Life Partners. Videos available: PAL, 51 Blanca, CO 81123-0051. 1-900-860-3033. $3.00/per minute. Adults.

PERSONAL—Cont'd

FREE! 100 photos marriage-minded girls. Moore-IO, Box 1266, Englewood, FL 34295-1266.

RECIPES

MOONS PICKLED SHROOMS. You don't have to like mushrooms to love these. For recipe, send $5.00 to Mullins, Dept. 2, P.O. Box 346, Fallon, NV 89406.

MUNCHIES with your mysteries! Six recipes, $5. SASE: Munchies, P.O. Box 46782, Papillion, NE 68046.

SONGWRITERS

POEMS WANTED. Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

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OLDTIME radio programs. Mysteries, adventure, suspense, science fiction, comedies. Classic tapes. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm, New Freedom, PA 17349.

TRAVEL

MYSTERY TOURS! Commemorating Agatha Christie's 100th birthday! Classic mysteries at her honeymoon hotel or Welsh Island castle! Also, mystery weekends across USA. Free brochures: Rendezvous with Murder Tours, 1001 Garnet, #600, San Diego, CA 92109. Call toll-free: 1-800-457-9515 (California); 1-800-428-7462 (Nationwide).

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PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR SPECIAL COMBINATIONS:
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Each combination is designed to give your ad the largest audience available.

Each combination offers you a Special Discount Rate.
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ELLERY QUEEN

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department Suite 1401
380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

15 WORD MINIMUM
Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ _____
_____ Capitalized word at 40¢ each
Total amount for 1 ad $ _____
15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount
(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ _____
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85
(c) Total amount for 3 ads $ _____
(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 months $144.00 x .85 $122.40)

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME _____
FIRM (NAME IN AD) _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ **STATE** _____ **ZIP** _____
PHONE: _____ **DATE:** _____
YOUR SIGNATURE _____

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$48.00**	(2) **$48.00**	(3) **$48.00**	(4) **$48.00**	(5) **$48.00**
(6) **$48.00**	(7) **$48.00**	(8) **$48.00**	(9) **$48.00**	(10) **$48.00**
(11) **$48.00**	(12) **$48.00**	(13) **$48.00**	(14) **$48.00**	(15) **$48.00**
(16) **$51.20**	(17) **$54.40**	(18) **$57.60**	(19) **$60.80**	(20) **$64.00**
(21) **$67.20**	(22) **$70.40**	(23) **$73.60**	(24) **$76.80**	(25) **$80.00**
(26) **$83.20**	(27) **$86.40**	(28) **$89.60**	(29) **$92.80**	(30) **$96.00**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. Mark Holly 380 Lexington Avenue New York New York 10017 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted. Phone # 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each. Garden City, New York 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D. F.O.B. P.O. U.S.A. 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words.) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

NEXT ISSUE...

13 stories—including

ISAAC ASIMOV (about the Black Widowers)

JULIAN SYMONS (about Mayhem Parva)

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Michael Vlado)

REGINALD HILL (a reprint—"Crowded Hour")

WILLIAM BANKIER (about Baytown)

JEFFRY SCOTT (about Jojo Lorraine)

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RUSSELL ATWOOD ..... *Associate Editor*
TERRI CZECZKO ..... *Art Director*
RON KULINER ..... *Associate Art Director*
CAROLE DIXON ..... *Production Director*
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ELIZABETH BEATTY ..... *Circulation Director*
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CYNTHIA MANSON .... *Director of Marketing & Subsidiary Rights*
CHRIS DORBANDT ... *Newsstand Marketing & Promotions Manager*
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NEW YORK
212-557-9100

JOEL DAVIS
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ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief
(1941–1982)

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MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

The secret behind Regent Scheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife. **$129.98** ($7.00) #A1933.

▼ THE MAGICAL SPARE BED

It's almost like pulling an extra bed out of a hat. Unlike most spare beds that gobble up storage space and are unwieldy to move, this one rolls down to fit a 36"-long, 3"-diameter canvas case, to stash in a closet corner, car trunk, camper, anywhere. Yet it unrolls in minutes to a full-size 27" x 73" bed that will even accommodate 6-footers, supports up to 500 pounds and is comfortable to boot. The secret's in the inventive construction: a cotton canvas sling is supported on laminated steel legs with 6 steel springs for cushioning and stability on rough ground. Toss the carrying strap over your shoulder and go — camping, beach, poolside; the 10" legs keep it off damp ground and sand. Of course, this bed is indispensable at home, country home, dorm — even for kids in motel rooms. A superb value at **$61.98** ($12.25) #A1931.

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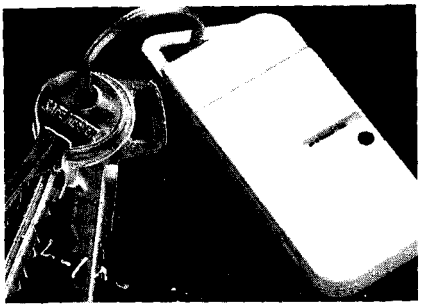
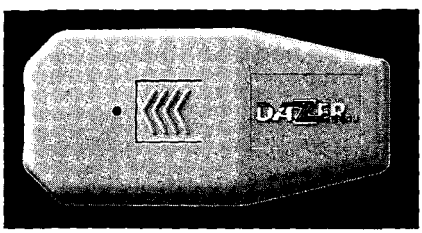
▼ EASY KEY FINDER



Keys are misplaced more often than any other modern essential. Now thanks to our easy key finder your keys can tell you where you put them. Clap your hands 4 times and it will chirp electronically. Works up to 30' away. Special hybrid microchip design requires no on/off switch (other units need you to turn them ON before you lose your keys). This unit has a high-impact plastic case; weighs a mere ½oz; comes with its own key ring; measures only 2½"x1 1/8"x 3/8". Batteries and a 30-day manufacturer's warranty are included. **$13.98** ($3.00) #A1889; two units, **$23.98** ($4.00) #A1890.

▼ HELPFUL TO HUMANS HARMLESS TO DOGS



Even the most dedicated canine aficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4¾" long) plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids—plus the proverbial postman. **$29.98**, ($3.00) #A1829X.

▼ YES, IT DOES WINDOWS — IN HALF THE TIME

Do we exaggerate? Actually, it may take *less* than half the time you'd normally spend assembling, toting and juggling bottles or buckets, rags, a hose, a stepstool. Spray & Wipe™ combines in one implement an ample reservoir for your cleaning fluid, a spray trigger at the base and adjustable mist-to-spray head at top, plus a squeegee. At 34" long, it eliminates much climbing; is lightweight but sturdy for firm leverage on the squeegee; swivel head reaches angles. Think patio doors, shower stalls, boats, campers, windshields, et al. **$15.98** ($4.00) #A1865X.

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CUSTOMER SERVICE CALL 201-367-2900

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

30 Day Money Back Guarantee For Exchange or Refund

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If ordering by mail send remittance to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept.090 EL; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701. Item price is followed by shipping and handling in ( ). Be sure to add both together to arrive at total price. N.J. residents add 6% sales tax. When using credit card — include account number, exp. date, signature. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign or C.O.D. orders.

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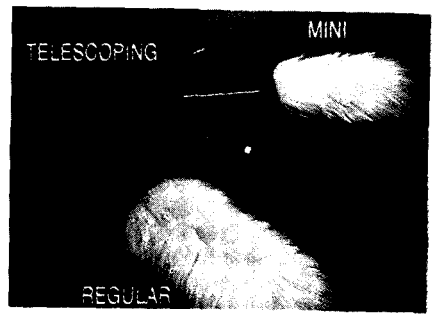
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ YOGURT CHEESE FUNNEL & RECIPE BOOK

In less than a minute, you can make the newest, healthiest most economical spread — just spoon plain yogurt into this woven plastic funnel, place in the frig, in 8-14 hrs. you have really creamy cheese. Using 1½% milkfat yogurt, it has 90% less fat, ⅔ calories but over twice the calcium of commercial cream cheese. Yet most people including avowed yogurt haters can't tell the difference! Use the 142 page recipe book included or substitute for cream cheese, mayonnaise, or sour cream in your favorite recipes. Funnel holds up to 16oz. Makes about 8oz. of yogurt cheese. Our set provides 142 page recipe book, 1 funnel, you'll have enough for the lemon cheesecake shown above — scrumptious and a mere 125 calories. **$26.98** ($5.00) #A1892.

▼ DUST MAGNETS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet — lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters for extra fragile objects. **$22.98** ($4.00) #A1870.

▼ GOOD NATURED GRATER

The Leifheit 4-in-1 grater is a sure-grip food holder that lets you work at top speed with no fear of flaying your fingers. Molded hand-grip gives sure control, indentations seat the grater securely atop bowls from 4½" to 9½" diameter. Blades are stainless steel, store right in grater frame, and provide choice of small and large shredders, medium grater, and ground-edge slicer. The unit itself is made of tough ABS plastic, dishwasher safe. Imported from West Germany. It's the first truly civilized grater we've seen. **$22.98** ($4.25) #A1910.

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